

BACK FIRE

A CALIFORNIA STORY

LOLA
JEAN
SIMPSON



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BACK FIRE



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BACK FIRE

A California Story

BY

LOLA JEAN SIMPSON

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PART ONE
PICNICS (1900-1903)

“One fire burns out another’s burning.”

—Romeo and Juliet, Act 1, Sc. 2.

BACK FIRE

CHAPTER I

AS THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

THAT April Fool picnic! Marais always believed it was obscurely connected with her outburst at the lunch table, her running away with Dan to Fowler's, and her wild time with Sydney, Preston, and the Zimmerman boy at the Native Sons' picnic. Just as three unhappy stars might shoot off a central, fatal brightness. If her mother hadn't forbidden her to go to the picnic with that sharp, inevitable "No, let's not hear any more about it," she was convinced the other things wouldn't have happened.

Her disappointment over the picnic was bitter enough in itself. As she had doubled up her fourteen year old length in the darkest corner of the woodshed, pushed back the tangle of hair that made a crimson blur in the dimness, and thrust her burning gray eyes closer to the knothole in front of her, the fresh flood of tears down her smudgy cheeks hadn't let her see the procession of April Fool picnickers on their way to Moore's Dam. But she had known they were flashing along College Street in their shiny wheeled buggies. She could hear them singing as they went,

Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along,
Merrily we roll along, o'er the deep, blue sea.

She had finally been able to hear their voices only by pressing so hard against the boards that their rough places made creases up and down her small face. They were getting farther and farther away. They had turned down Central Avenue where Hay Spinkham, "Doc" Farley and the rest of the Oakleyville merchants in their store doors would smile after the glittering trail. "Kids'll be kids. But I didn't get my education that way when I was young. Not by a long shot." Now they were on the county road, gliding through an emerald sea of young grain that rolled toward the blue wall of the Coast Range, the air full of the smell of buttercups and baby blue eyes and young birds' eggs, the boys holding their reins proudly, the girls looking at them from underneath lacy hat brims. On their way to the great, annual picnic of Parnassus College. And instead of having a new blue dimity like Lydia Sharsbury's and sitting beside Dan wearing a necktie made out of the same material as her dress, the blob of hair falling over his black, shining eyes, his mouth that was sometimes hard and stubborn smiling at her, she had had to stay at home and keep an eye on Young John and wait on the table and do the dishes. Because mother didn't believe in boys and girls going together, wouldn't let her go even when Dan had asked her.

As she lost the last wisp of her bright dream, a sob bubbled from her lips. She had looked over her shoulder apprehensively and gulped hard. Goodness, she hadn't even wanted Young John, only three, squatted on the dirt floor of the woodshed to hear her crying. But he was too busy with that funny plaything Theodore had made for him out of

a piece of kindling wood for a body and arms and legs of clock springs. Bean-is-ter Fos-is-ter he called it. Nobody knew why. And Theodore, the man-of-all-work, wheeling a load of manure along the board walk to the verbena bed was just as apt to hear her. When he caught a glimpse of her his squat figure would halt. Theodore loved so to talk. Mother often said if it hadn't been for that fault, he'd be a pearl of greatest price. Not that any one could conceive of Theodore's oddly wrinkled, fiercely mustached, face as like a jewel of any kind. He had blinked his bright, shoe-button eyes into her corner.

"Made a purty good showin', didn't they?"

"Uh-huh." Marais had clenched her hands against a rough stick of wood and flinched at a splinter beneath her thumb nail.

"Well, I see Dan Stillman ain't above runnin' away with the others, even if he is the President's son."

Marais had forgotten all about Theodore and her smarting thumb. Once more she had pressed her face against the cobwebby lookout. So Dan had gone, after all! Who was to have the supreme joy of going with him? She had strained forward, but the last buggy had long since rolled by in a shower of sunshine, leaving only the hard, empty street. "Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along." Oh, if only mother didn't have such funny notions about boys and girls going together. And you couldn't talk it over with her. Marais had tremblingly broached the subject weeks before, "But why can't I go, mother, when all the girls are?" With that stern judge's look that matched her square face

and high, black pompadour Mrs. Plover had raised her finger while the lines deepened about her wide mouth in the way they always did when Marais questioned her authority. "Not another word, Marais. Don't ask why you can't do such things. You just be a good girl and mind what's said to you."

"But mother," Marais had protested, "if you can't have bangs or go to picnics or anything, everybody's going to think you're a regular baby, and you'll never have a speck of fun."

Though her blood had been thumping hard in rebellion, she had quailed under Mrs. Plover's sarcasm. "Fourteen years old and talking about bangs and parties as though you were a young lady like Cousin Jaquith. I suppose you think it's all right for boys and girls to play kissing games the way the children around here do. Well, don't you let a boy lay the weight of his hand on you. Boys don't respect a girl who lets them kiss her. And don't let me hear any more of such foolishness out of you."

Of course mother was mistaken. But you couldn't convince her of it in twenty billion years. Didn't Lydia play kissing games at every party she went to? And to-day she was riding along in her lovely blue dimity, making eyes at Lem, and nobody thought anything about it. While she—Marais had cast a scornful glance about her at the dingy woodshed, at her grimy hands, her crumpled gingham dress. Yes, mother was certainly mistaken. If they could only talk it over—just once—like two people, instead of a grown-up person who knew everything in the world, and a baby with no sense! Her mind had almost burst at times with questions. But her rush

of words was invariably halted in midstream by Mrs. Plover's uplifted finger and her inevitable rebuke, "That'll do, Marais. Little girls should be seen and not heard."

Once she had run home from school and burst like a gusty whirlwind into the sitting-room where her mother and Cousin Jaquith were seated.

"Oh, mother, just guess what's happened!" she had exclaimed breathlessly. "Big Jennie Grissim was married this afternoon at the point of a pistol to Hank Hornlein. And she's in bed with a baby."

For a moment Mrs. Plover had forgotten her motherly function in her amazement. "Marais, wherever did you hear such a thing?"

"Lydia Sharsbury and Abbie Farnham know all about it." The words tumbled over each other in her excitement. At last she had an audience. Mother and Cousin Jaquith were both listening with wide-open eyes. "Old man Grissim drove downtown and took Hank out of the barber shop in his white coat just as he was. He drove him up to the Grissim place and marched him into Jennie's bedroom. Then he whipped out a pistol and clapped it to Hank's head. 'Here's a pistol and here's Jennie and your baby,' he thundered. 'Take your choice.' "

"Hush, Marais!" Mrs. Plover's horrified voice had cut short the narrative.

That night she had talked to Marais solemnly. "Such things aren't fit for young girls even to think about." She had enunciated each word slowly, her square face paler than usual. But every time the child had passed the battered-looking Grissim house on the corner two blocks from her home, she wondered about the over blown girl who had been mar-

ried to the dashing young barber with a pistol pressed to his temple and had afterward disappeared from Oakleyville. For some mysterious reason mother placed that event and kissing games in the same class. Yet she and daddy must have kissed before they were married. In spite of her courage in filling the house with boarders and staving ahead with her shoulders firmly erect, Marais knew she had never been the same since Hay Spinkham and Uncle Webb had brought her unconscious father home from the store where he had figured night after night over his ledger. She could hear the heavy clog-clog of their steps on the side porch yet—could see the still face and closed eyes and high, seamed forehead of the stranger on the stretcher—could hear her mother's hoarse, tearing cry, "John, John, what's the matter?" Oh, yes, mother had loved daddy.

It was all very confusing. Daddy could have straightened out the tangle for her. He would have consoled her about the April Fool picnic, his blue eyes looking at her from behind their gold-rimmed glasses, his kind, tired smile half hidden by the short, sandy beard. Marais had blinked hard to keep back the ready tears.

"I don't see why She won't let you go," Theodore had observed sympathetically from the verberna bed, working his mouth as he lifted a dark oval of earth with his shovel. "I don't sure. You'd 'a' made as good a showin' as any of them flip Dolly Vardens. But She must have her reasons."

Sometimes Theodore's way of calling her mother "She" made Marais smile. Now his words had flooded her with a sharp longing. Oh, if only she

had golden hair and wonderful brown eyes like Sydney's, and could sweep about in white satin gowns with trains that reached from the woodshed clear to the kitchen door. If only she could open her lips and just stun the whole of Parnassus College and her mother with her eloquence. Then they'd be sorry they hadn't known how great she was.

Suddenly she had sprung to her feet, the pupils of her eyes black in their intensity, on each cheek a spot of fire.

"Some day," she had announced, oblivious of Theodore, Young John, the whole indifferent world, "some day I'm going to do all the things I want to. I'll—I'll write a book. I'll have bangs. I'll go with boys. I'll play kissing games from morning till night." She had drawn herself to her full height, her bosom heaving, her hair a dim flame—in spite of her dirty face, the rent in her stocking, and the slivers of wood clinging to her grubby dress a small figure of potential power.

"Marais, lunch time. Come set the table." Mrs. Plover's peremptory voice had smitten sharply across her soaring dream.

The brilliant picture had wavered, her shoulders had crumpled. Slowly dragging one foot after the other, she had walked toward the kitchen door, and her first outburst.

CHAPTER II

THE GOLDEN EAGLE

MRS. PLOVER raised her flushed face from the bread board as Marais entered the hot kitchen, and, frowning at her red eyes, rapped out, "Well, you're a pretty sight, I must say," The child's heart smarted with resentment as her mother cut the biscuit dough into circular pieces and flung them into a greased pan with a precision as unerring as her next word. "Step lively now, Marais. They're all here to lunch to-day, and your Uncle Webb too."

Marais always noticed that the only time her mother's genial tone took an edge was when she spoke to her. She decided Mrs. Plover had caught the habit from Grandmother Haliburton, whose idea of motherhood was an attitude of perpetual discipline toward her child, if that child happened to be a girl. There was another code for mothers and sons. That was why Mrs. Plover's light blue eye softened whenever it rested upon Young John's curly, red head.

The only time since John Plover's death that this geniality had failed was when Marais's mother had been forced to use his life insurance to raise the mortgage from their home. Marais had heard her discussing the matter with Uncle Webb one night, an unfamiliar, anguished note in her voice. "It took his life to keep a roof over our heads; but I'll see

that his name stays clear of debt if I have to work my fingers to the bone." And the next day her white face had been graven with fresh lines.

With customary courage Augusta Plover filled with boarders the two story, bay-windowed house she and John Plover had taken such pride in building. Marais longed to have some part in this protection of her father's honor. But on the very morning she had nerved herself to say she wanted to go to public school instead of Parnassus College—what greater sacrifice could she make when Dan and everybody else she knew went to Parnassus?—Mrs. Plover announced briefly that she had arranged with President Stillman to pay Marais's tuition of fifty dollars a term in monthly installments. "No one's ever going to be able to say the education of a child of mine's been neglected," she had ended grimly, leaving her daughter with a sense of defeat and obligation.

"If you've got everything on the table, go call them to lunch." Mrs. Plover glanced over her shoulder as Marais carefully balanced the filled water pitcher with calla lillies stamped upon its body. "Hurry up and fill the glasses. The biscuits'll be done by the time they've finished their salad. Be sure and put the butter plates on. You know you always forget."

The boarders filed into the dining-room, past the old oak sideboard surmounted by spreading deer's antlers, past the oil painting of pineapples and oranges Cousin Jaquith had done when she studied "oils" at Parnassus College; ugly Anne Brisbane Banks, the vice principal of the grammar school; pretty Cousin Jaquith who taught in the primary

grade; little Professor Timorson, her own English teacher at Parnassus; big Abner Jewett with a squeak in his voice who had his meals with Mrs. Plover and roomed at the Central House near his shoe store—and, at last, Uncle Webb! As her eyes rested on his graceful figure and black, tossed-back hair of her idol, Marais's heart fluttered. Nobody could be unhappy long when Uncle Webb was around. He'd make a dog laugh.

She knew exactly what the others would do. Boarders always did the same things three times a day regularly without batting an eyelid. Mother said so, and mother usually hit the nail on the head. Professor Timorson would pull Cousin Jaquith's chair back from the table. And Miss Banks would raise her eyebrows clear to her thin, sandy hair as much as to say, "Why don't you do that for me instead of for a measly second-grade teacher?" When Cousin Jaquith thanked Professor Timorson she always kept her eyes lowered. She didn't like Abner Jewett, who stared at her so hard that once or twice he had tipped over his glass of water and caused a lot of bother. You couldn't blame him much. Cousin Jaquith was awfully pretty with her leaf-brown hair and the soft color that came and went in her cheeks. The only time it stayed was when Uncle Webb was around. Everybody knew Abner was crazy about her, but it was amazing that mother wanted Jaquith to marry him. Even if he was a good provider, as mother said, she hoped Cousin Jaquith would stick to her guns and not marry him if she didn't love him. She bet she'd never do such a thing.

Oh, yes, she knew just what the boarders would

do. But you could never tell about Uncle Webb. Where he was going to sit; what he would say.

"Well, Miss Banks," his sparkling eyes, light blue like his sister's, but brimming over with gayety, rested gallantly on the sharp features and slatlike figure of the vice principal, "you're not as fortunate as our friend Professor Timorson." His friendly glance included the tired, little professor. "Your pupils don't run away and give you a holiday on April Fool."

Marais gulped hard and a mist swam before her eyes.

Professor Timorson answered in his careful voice, "It hasn't been much of a holiday thus far. I've corrected papers all morning." Then the little fan-shaped lines about his eyes relaxed. "Miss Marais, I went over your paper on 'A Day on Ellen's Isle' this morning. It was excellent. You certainly show imagination and dramatic power."

Marais opened her lips, conscious of the blistering gaze of Anne Brisbane Banks. Goodness, why did that woman hate her so? But Uncle Webb saved her from replying.

"Hello there, Marais." How her heart leaped up at his gay voice! It had such a ring. "Why aren't you at the picnic with the rest of the kids?"

Her tongue stuck to the top of her mouth.

"April Fool picnics aren't for little girls." Mrs. Plover emphasized her suave crispness of tone by tapping the meat spoon against the plate she held. "Marais's turn will come after awhile. Will you have some sweet potatoes, Abner?"

Marais felt the eyes of everybody at the table focused on her. Did Uncle Webb cast a sorry look

at her mother? Her face was one throbbing scar, her hair straining back so hard that it held her eyes staring wide open. She couldn't shut out the ring of curious faces if she'd been going to die the next minute.

If only Miss Banks hadn't lifted her thin nose and sniffed! "I agree with Mrs. Plover. April Fool picnics are no place for young people. Those boys and girls go away for the whole day all by themselves. They get into all sorts of mischief. *There's no telling what they do.*"

Suddenly Marais sat up very straight, a great roaring in her ears. "It's not true." The words burst out as though some explosive force had shot them from her mouth. "They go just to have a good time. It's dreadful for you to say such a thing. President Stillman goes and——"

"Marais, leave the table." Mrs. Plover's stern voice checked her headlong speech.

In the loud, ticking silence she slid from her chair and walked numbly into the kitchen. The only thing she saw in the swimming blur was her mother's set face. The only sound she heard was a grumble which seemed to come from Uncle Webb.

Oh, those long, aching moments when she stood first on one foot and then on the other by the kitchen stove while Cousin Jaquith carried the plates from the dining-room in her place and Mrs. Plover, with impartial precision portioned the whipped cream on the baked apples. It seemed as if they would never finish their dessert. But at last even Cousin Jaquith had made her final trip, and the dining-room was still. Marais knew her mother was in there, not

moving a muscle, that look on her face. Then she heard her name.

She forced herself to walk over the threshold, but her legs were sticks of wood. Mrs. Plover sat at the head of the long, deserted table. A picture of Cardinal Wolsey in her English history floated vaguely through Marais's mind—the black wig above the wide, white forehead, the stern eye, the square, unflinching jaw. Her mother surveyed her with that level judge's look. "What made you do such a thing?"

She took a step forward, her hands clasped tightly. Now was the time to talk things over, to explain that boys and girls going together didn't mean anything dreadful. When she looked at Mrs. Plover her hands fell apart. She might have known her mother wasn't asking for information. The question was only a beginning.

"Do you realize that you contradicted Miss Banks before the whole tableful of boarders?"

"Yes, mother."

"What do you suppose they thought?"

Why did she force her to answer those questions? It made her feel so—so small.

"I don't know," she faltered.

"What would your father think?"

Marais swallowed hard. Something told her that to cry would mean utter defeat.

"Answer me."

"I—I don't know."

"Well, I know. He'd be humiliated to the dust that a daughter of his would insult people at her mother's table."

Marais sensed the reason for the pause. It was to drive home this point.

"Do you know what Miss Banks will do?"

Marais shook her head.

"She'll probably leave."

The child started forward. "Oh, no, mother." She knew how closely Mrs. Plover figured with the boarders' money. Why, Miss Banks' check paid the grocery bill.

"Oh, yes, she may," insisted Mrs. Plover inexorably. "You know why I have these boarders."

Marais winced in the face of what was coming.

"It's to keep a roof over our heads. But if you're going to drive them all away——"

"Oh," uttered Marais, the tears beginning to roll down her white cheeks, "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. I promise."

Mrs. Plover leaned back in her chair and sighed; but her face remained unmoved. "You'll have to apologize to Miss Banks. At the table to-night. After the dishes are done go upstairs and think things over."

Think things over! She sat beside the window in her room where she knew every object with her eyes closed: her funny old walnut bed covered with the "crazy quilt" Grandmother Haliburton had pieced; her father's faded map of the world hanging above her study table and opposite it the steel engraving of "Mother and Child," a sweet-faced lady in a billowy dress trimmed with bows down the front smiling upon a small child; her little bookcase in which her beloved "Mill on the Floss," "Lorna Doone," and "Vanity Fair" were crowded against Syle's "From Milton to Tennyson," her algebra, Myers'

“Ancient History,” and Cruden’s Concordance her mother had given her when she entered the Bible class at Sunday school. A gay spring breeze cooled the nerve throbbing in her cheek. Saucy paroquet fig leaves danced greenly in the afternoon light. To her tired senses the thick, yellow fragrance of the Oregon grape in the silent garden below, the snowy curtain of the Lady Banksia rose, the tall spire of the palm her father had loved overtopping College Street, even Mr. Wentworth’s great house beyond the frosted, iron fence—everything was a mirage. Her disappointment and her humiliation baptized her into a new and solitary existence. She’d probably never again slip up to her room to watch for Dan go to the pasture to milk the Stillman cow. Never. That old life was a thing of the past. Her misery which somehow gave her a sense of importance also separated her from everything that belonged to it, from Dan at the picnic now, laughing and talking to the girls, that shining look in his black eyes, from all of them there by the big dam where the water rippled and caught the reflection of the blue sky and the girls’ bright dresses. Her business was to sit in her room all afternoon, thinking up an apology to make to Anne Brisbane Banks. Of course she’d do it. There was no way out. But it wasn’t fair. Uncle Webb hadn’t thought so.

Suddenly she laid her head on the sill of the window Dan passed every evening and burst into tears.

But after dinner when her painful ordeal was accomplished, and, washed in the purifying sense of atonement, she sat in her mother’s room absorbed in “St. Elmo,” the door opened and Uncle Webb stood there. He swept with his brilliant glance, that al-

ways set her pulses dancing, his sister's shabbily cheerful room, Mrs. Plover and Cousin Jaquith chatting in low tones to avoid disturbing Young John, and Marais curled up on the little old wicker chair. Did his eyes rest a moment on her as if they said, "I hadn't intended to stop by this evening, but I wanted you to know I'm sorry about to-day, you poor kid." She always felt the bond tugging between them when he looked at her that way.

"Geewilikens, I'd like to know what you women find to talk about that's so interesting," he chuckled.

"Jaquith's been telling me about the latest escapade of your gang." Mrs. Plover returned his quizzical gaze with her severe look in which struggled her unwilling adoration for this reckless twenty-eight-year-old brother.

Marais didn't wonder the stern lines of her mother's mouth relaxed beneath his smile. No storybook hero fascinated her half so much as he, already pacing back and forth in the crowded space between her mother's big bed, the rosewood sewing table, and Young John's crib, with more unconscious hauteur—she loved that word for him—that St. Elmo himself expressed. Why did Cousin Jaquith, who had moved suddenly into the shadow, keep her eyes down instead of watching his every motion?

"What escapade?" he countered, the light catching the twinkle in his eye which radiated sparks. Just as it did when he quoted Shakespeare or Mark Twain or Dickens.

The way his black hair waved off his high forehead, the very set of his coat on his shoulders, the careless grace with which he always placed his hat on his head, overwhelmed her with admiration and

inarticulate longing for the world of adventure, of romance, of freedom in which she believed he moved. He was the great, golden eagle in Shelley's poem "The Cloud" Professor Timorson was always quoting in the English class as an example of imagery:

An eagle alit
One moment may sit
In the light of his golden wings.

Ready to swoop down beside you for a moment, only to disappear the next instant, you didn't know where.

"Something to the effect that you took Tip Carney out to the cemetery last night and scared him nearly to death," observed Mrs. Plover dryly. "Pretty sort of a scrape for you and your gang to be mixed up in."

That gang of Uncle Webb's! She knew them all by sight. Three studied law in the offices of Garouette and Brainard. Five were sons of rich farmers around the county. The rest held positions in the courthouse at Oakleyville. But they found more time for playing politics, driving fast horses, and gambling and drinking in the Central House than for actual work. Like the whole town, Marais took a secret pride in their wildness, and her uncle's position as county clerk, his power of oratory, and his imagination constituted him in her eyes their lawful ringleader.

Webb planted himself in front of his sister and looked down upon her from his handsome height. "Carney got just what was coming to him. Why can't he play real April Fool jokes instead of writ-

ing indecent language all over Salome Buford's sidewalk?"

A sardonic spark shot from Mrs. Plover's eye. "Since when did you and your friends become the protectors of a woman like Salome Buford?" Marais was oddly, excitedly glad that she gave him as good as he sent. Her mother wasn't afraid of anybody—man, woman, or child.

Webb's forehead creased in an annoyed furrow. "We'll never agree on that subject, Augusta, so what's the use to go into it? Salome's a woman. And that's enough——"

Marais closed "St. Elmo" and leaned forward. She had heard fragments of Salome Buford's story, of how she had traveled in foreign lands with Rhodes Bannister, the mining millionaire who had shot himself through the heart when he woke one morning to find himself a bankrupt. It was after that that Salome had come to live with her brother Jerome in the little stone house down on Fourth Street, bringing with her the treasures she had collected during her travels. Some one had said that her picture painted as "Morning" at Bannister's command hung for years in the barroom at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. That it was wonderfully beautiful. But it was impossible to associate the solidly built woman whose yellowish gray hair hung about her mottled cheeks with the slender, rosy nymph said to be stepping barefooted from a dewy leaf in the picture. Uncle Webb couldn't be in love with Salome Buford. He just liked to hear her talk about her travels.

"When a young cub forgets that a woman's down and out——" he was saying.

A muffled yell from the crib startled Marais and sent Mrs. Plover hurriedly to Young John's side.

"Bean-is-ter Fos-is-ter's eyes bug out," he sobbed, pushing his cherished plaything as far from him as possible. "Marais did it. She made 'em bug out."

His mother listened in bewilderment. "Marais, he says you've done something to him." She turned to her daughter in despair after trying to quiet him. "See if you can make him keep still."

Marais remembered that she had drawn for Bean-is-ter Fos-is-ter a face with slanting eyes and wide, grinning mouth, and that under its initial effect Young John had been strangely subdued. When she had finally stilled his yells by hiding the terrifying plaything behind the bureau, she noted that Cousin Jaquith had risen softly and was leaving the room. She did this lately every time Uncle Webb came in. With a sigh of satisfaction that she didn't have to go to bed, Marais returned to her chair.

Mrs. Plover, still ironically intent upon what her brother was saying, caught the child's settling movement. "Bedtime, Marais."

"St. Elmo" fell with a bang to the floor. "Oh, please, mother, let me stay and hear what happened," she implored, forgetting the wall of reserve which had risen between them since her apology to Anne Brisbane Banks.

Mrs. Plover shook her head, unmoved by her glistening appeal. "This isn't any sort of story for little girls to hear."

"Isn't that a little rough, Augusta?" Uncle Webb was halted by his sister's quick frown.

His eyes bright with sympathy said all sorts of

comforting things to his niece across the gulf of enforced silence.

She went slowly to her room, her eyes prickling, her teeth shut hard on her trembling lips. If she could only have heard the rest of the adventure!

For some time after she had gotten into bed she could hear the rise and fall of voices in Mrs. Plover's room and Uncle Webb's pacing back and forth. She could fill in the occasional pauses with the light flashing from his eyes, the quiver of dramatic mirth about his mouth as he watched the effect of his narrative upon his sister. She could set the scene, but, after all, she was missing the story of Tip Carney in the cemetery.

Suddenly her mother's door opened. Marais's tense back became limp. Uncle Webb was leaving.

"Going downtown, Webb? A little late, isn't it? Ma'll be waiting up for you." The picture of Grandmother Haliburton rigid in her rocker, the light of her single kerosene lamp falling on the pages of her big, open Bible and losing itself in the cobwebby corners of the low-ceiled room, was swallowed up in Marais's sudden, wild desire for the escape of Uncle Webb from the dim-eyed, old vigilance. Oh, she hoped he wouldn't go back to the gloomy, little house almost hidden by oaks. She exulted in his careless answer which floated from the stairs. "I've got to see Dwight Brockett on business. I won't be long."

Mrs. Plover's door closed; there was a brief silence; then—Oh, delirious and unexpected joy—her door was pushed open ever so softly and Uncle Webb's head was silhouetted against her wall illuminated by the hall light. There beside her bed, their heads close together, he whispered the rest of the

story, of how the masked figures commanded Tip Carney to enter the cemetery, of his march down the long, black avenue, of his terror when his mysterious guards paused with him beside a yawning grave where he had his choice between vowing never to bother Salome Buford again and stepping into the dark chasm.

"He promised," whispered Uncle Webb. "Then he struck off down the avenue."

In quivering tenseness Marais heard of Tip Carney's endeavor to leap the cemetery fence, the white figures looming before him, the pistol shots splitting the still air.

"Did he get shot, Uncle Webb?" she broke in, lifting her head at the thought.

He chuckled softly. "The cartridges were blank."

"But the ghosts? Were they your gang?"

"Your dreams will tell you that." He kissed her lightly on the forehead as he rose. "I must clear out or your mother'll spank us both."

Marais listened with her hands clenched under the sheet until she heard the hoofs of Black Bess clop-clopping down the street. Then she relaxed, drawing a deep breath. He had escaped safely. Clop-clop, fainter and fainter. She nestled down in her bed, smiling in the dark. Was anybody in the world so wonderful as Uncle Webb? He'd sneaked into her room because he knew how she'd thrill over the story of the white figures rising from the tombstones and from behind cypress trees, the long line of buggies riding silently into the night. He had come for another reason, too; to make up for her disappointment about the picnic. He knew how your

heart swelled and swelled until you felt it would burst. And how you felt sometimes as though you'd like to sail away on a crimson cloud into the sunset and never, never come back. No wonder he wanted to get away from Grandmother Haliburton and go where there were lights and music or—who knew?—on another wild, dark ride. When she grew up, she'd do exactly the same thing. She wished she was sitting beside him now, the clop-clop of Black Bess in her ears, the wind blowing the hair back from her face, the stars spinning by overhead whispering, "Just Marais and Uncle Webb. Just Marais and Uncle Webb. Together. Running away from Grandmother Haliburton and mother."

She moved uneasily, turned on her hot pillow. After all, Uncle Webb made Grandmother Haliburton and mother unhappy by his wild ways. They would do anything for him. She remembered when he was running for county clerk, how he had dashed up to her mother's front door on election night, flushed and reckless-eyed, to ask for the three hundred dollars Mrs. Plover had in the Building and Loan Association. "Just to clinch things," he had urged. And what was she doing? Reveling in his iniquity. God punished sinners with a fiery death for smaller offenses than that. Brother Hartleb said so in the pulpit every Sunday. She tried to say her prayers: "Now I lay me down to sleep," but the clop-clop of Black Bess's hoofs still hammered in her ears, "I pray the Lord my soul to keep." The scene in her mother's room rose again and swam and fell to pieces. Uncle Webb pacing the floor, his eyes shining with the excitement of his tale, her mother's grudging interest, the shadow on her face because

of the woman, Salome Buford. "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

"I don't care. I'm glad he does things," she murmured drowsily. "I'm going to when I get big." Her eyes closed on a flash of golden wings.

CHAPTER III

THAT ENCHANTED DAY

MARAIIS came slowly out of the Baptist church basement and stood at the foot of the steps among the boys and girls laughing and whispering about the April Fool picnic. The air was heavy with the scent of locust blossoms—mm-m, but they were sweet—the sky flecked with silly little clouds, like puffs of eider down in the cool Sabbath sunshine. Usually its golden-white purity, different from the glare of Monday or other days, streaming upon the stained-glass window dedicated in illuminated letters to David Haliburton, thrilled her with the fact that she was his granddaughter.

Marais knew all about how he had named Oakleyville and founded the Baptist church and Parnassus College which lifted its three-storied, red-brick height above the small white edifice beside it. Every saloon in town had closed its doors the day of his funeral, an unheard-of thing. But Mrs. Plover was proud of saying that her father had been recognized as a man and gentleman first, and a preacher afterward. Grandmother Haliburton often told how they had crossed the plains on their honeymoon with a train of prairie wagons, how Grandfather Haliburton had chosen the site of Oakleyville in the midst of the fertile Sacramento Valley and named it because of the oaks whose branches swept the lush grass, how he had been the town's first clerk, the

first schoolmaster, as well as the first minister to preach a sermon in the roughly built chapel in the cemetery, Oakleyville's first meetinghouse. Throughout the whole of northern California nobody had baptized, married, and buried as many people as had her grandfather, whose kindly face with its strong, dramatic mouth and student's forehead crowned by prematurely white hair, familiar to her from the picture over Grandmother Haliburton's fireplace, was welcome in every town from Marysville to Dixon during the thirty-five years of his work of a pioneer.

But even the memory of such an ancestor couldn't keep you from feeling terribly alone when everybody else was buzzing about the April Fool picnic and casting pitying glances in your direction.

She had known she would have this shut-out feeling. Even when she had started for Sunday school in the green-watered silk Cousin Jaquith had brought her from San Francisco, her leghorn hat with its broad, cream-colored ribbon of double-faced satin hiding the lamentable lack of bangs, a clean handkerchief folded between her Bible and Sunday-school quarterly.

On her way home she noticed how aloofly the white houses with their green shutters glistened in the clear air. The lawns swept and cut for the Lord's Day shone as bright as emerald, and the rosebushes, the laurestinus shrubs, and acacias were as fragrant as the Florida water in mother's cut-glass bottle. Surely, Marais reflected, with the world washed clean of every taint and herself with that scrubbed Sunday feeling, something wonderful ought to happen.

Suddenly there was a clatter of wheels behind her and some one spoke her name. "Say, Marais, want to go for a ride?"

That voice! She stood stock-still, her heart fluttering like a snared bird in her throat. Dan—Dan Stillman hung one leg over the side of his father's old buckboard and shook the blob of hair out of his eyes, a sudden smile breaking the somberness of his rough-hewn features.

Still she was struck dumb, though she felt exactly like jumping up and down and screaming for joy.

"I've got to go out to Fowler's for eggs. It won't take long."

To go for a ride with Dan! The sun poured down a blinding sheet of gold. Birds sang a heavenly chorus in every treetop.

"Aw, come on, Marais." Dan's coaxing tone pushed her faltering resolution over the top of the hurdle. Turning her back recklessly on the picture of the table waiting to be set at home, and on her mother's stern condemnation of such a jaunt, especially on Sunday, she placed her foot on the hub of the wheel and gave her hand to Dan. He swung her up on the rickety seat beside him, whistled to old, one-eyed Frank, and away they rattled the length of College Street, out Cemetery Avenue where Uncle Webb's gang had scared Tip Carney almost to death, and so to Fowler's and enchantment two miles away.

Going for a ride with Dan! A regular April Fool picnic all by themselves. The sun scattered its radiance all over the fields of fresh green dotted with farmhouses, with orchards frothing white and pink blossoms, and grazing cattle. It was the floor of

fairylund to Marais gazing with dazzled eyes over the stretches of the Sacramento Valley. The little white boats on the blue sea overhead puffed their sails joyously, disappearing beyond the jagged line of the Coast Range on one side and floating even to the misty, snow-crowned Sierras on the other, with that smell of baby blue eyes and poppies and buttercups which had hung on the air the first day of April. She sniffed blissfully, clinging to the seat as old Frank spun forward under the slap of Dan's lines. She was still a little stunned by her rashness and the overwhelming fact that she was seated beside Dan on her way to Fowler's. But her sense of unreality was shot with a wild thrill of escape. "I'm riding away like Uncle Webb. I know just how it feels to be a golden eagle flying to the highest mountain peak in the world."

When Frank drew up stiff-legged at Fowler's Dan swung her unceremoniously over the dusty wheel and left her to follow him into the old-fashioned garden where button roses, petunias, and sweet alyssum ranged themselves in stiff order along the bottle-bordered path. Fowler's! The small, flat-faced, brown house among its oaks and locusts had fascinated her ever since she could remember. You could play games of hide and seek in the vineyard. There was the almond orchard brimming now in rosy bloom. She'd bet old Mrs. Fowler had beehives in its shade. Besides that the irrigating ditch ran brimful all summer under cottonwoods that met overhead, making a long, green shimmering road of water. She'd always wanted to take off her clothes and just paddle around in that lovely, winding stream like a polliwog. A good thing she didn't

say anything to mother about that. Then there was Jake Fowler, dark, fierce pirate that he looked. She used to hide behind the Oregon grape bush at home whenever she saw him drive past, sitting like a great, black bird in his spring cart. Mother said he was half Indian and that old Mrs. Fowler was a squaw. That was why nobody ever saw her outside her own yard. But she knew everybody in the county. Dan had gone into the house where she was now, swinging his basket as though they both weren't on the point of being plunged into the great adventure.

Marais never forgot the hour that followed—the little woman bent and brown, a small, woolen shawl pinned over her shoulders, in the dark kitchen that smelt like wild flowers and dried fruit, the plate of golden cookies with which she made Marais and Dan fill their pockets, the hunt for eggs in the barn during which Marais stuck her foot in a nest and splashed her dress fearfully with yellow, the slide down the long slope of hay which she accomplished so easily because her silk dress slid smoothly, her fall into the arms of Jake, more than ever like a real pirate, Dan's question when Jake, after showing them the new ducks and chickens, had gone to pump water for the stock, "Can you climb a tree, Marais?"

"Sure," returned Marais, hopping over a stick as she set her teeth in a generous sandwich of bread and butter and honey Mrs. Fowler had given her as a reward for gathering the eggs.

If she was unconscious of the contrast between the pale, sedate child walking laggingly home from Sunday school and this wild, young thing with flam-

ing cheeks, hair full of straw, and dress crumpled and stained beyond repair, Dan wasn't. "Come on, then." He grinned and led the way to the cottonwoods over the brimming ditch.

He mounted one of the gnarled limbs and Marais, agile as a squirrel, followed at his heels, waving off the assistance of even his hand. And presently they found themselves seated on the friendly old limb directly over the water.

"Sit in the crotch, Marais. It's safer," Dan commanded.

Marais flushed at his tone and did not move.

"Go on!" he urged impatiently.

Instead she wriggled toward the unprotected middle of the limb. Then she looked at him defiantly. "Don't, don't speak that way, Dan. It spoils everything."

For a moment he regarded her in frowning silence; then his face melted into its softening smile. "You're a funny girl, Marais." He moved over beside her as though dismissing a puzzling subject. "Great, isn't it?" he grinned after a little, producing from his pocket two ruddy, Fowler apples.

"Uh-huh!" Marais swung her legs and munched happily. After a moment of crunching silence she asked, "Dan, did you go to the April Fool picnic?"

He shook his head. "Not me. I started with 'em. But I went fishing instead. Why wouldn't your mother let you go, Marais?"

A cloud darkened the rippling water beneath Marais's feet. "She doesn't believe in boys and girls going together. She thinks they—they cut up."

Dan smiled cheerfully. "Never you mind. Isn't

this a darn sight more fun than any old April Fool picnic?"

She nodded, looking about her with a thrilled content. A day of enchantment. Enchanted bees were humming down there in the orchard. Fragrance of fairy almond blossoms mingled with sunshine filtering through green, growing leaves, was wafted away over the water flowing, flowing to the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow. Dan didn't know it as he sat there whistling and eating his apple, but he was a prince—the Black Prince he could be with his shining eyes and midnight hair. Only he needn't have such a sad ending as the real Black Prince had. Stay on, lovely, enchanted moment! Don't slip away like the water, leaving everything just flat and ordinary with boarders and dishes and lessons and mother's stern eye.

"What you going to be, Dan?" she asked all at once.

The shining look was blotted from his eyes. "I? Lawyer, I guess. Why?"

"Nothing."

He kicked at the bark of an adjoining limb, a shadow settling on his face. "My dad wants me to go to the university when I graduate from Parnassus. He's got it fixed up for me to study law."

There was a little silence. "I don't want to," he went on sullenly. "And maybe I won't." After a moment. "What do you want to do, Marais? But of course you'll get married, like all girls."

Marais threw back her head, stung by the manly scorn of Dan's shrug. "I'm never going to get married. Sydney Dalrymple and I have promised each

other that we're going to stay single all our lives long."

"Sydney Dalrymple." Marais flushed to her forehead at his contemptuous tone. "She never knows what she's going to do the next minute. She'll probably marry half a dozen times."

"Dan!" The pupils of Marais's eyes dilated angrily. "Don't talk that way about Sydney. She's my very best friend. Why, I'm looking forward to her visit next week more than most anything in the whole world."

Dan squared his jaw. "I can't help it. She's a fly-up-the-creek. I don't like her a little bit."

Marais bit back her tears. How could Dan be so hateful?

"She's not a speck like you, Marais." After all there was something beautiful in the huskiness of his voice when he lowered it that way. She couldn't meet the funny, swimming look in his eyes.

"What you going to do if you don't get married?" he asked.

"I'm going to write books." She'd never told her ambition to any one before. Now that the news was out it was rather fun to see the astonishment on Dan's face. "Once I started a novel."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh. It began, 'A fainting form emerged from the wood and fell panting to the ground.'"

"Say, that's a dandy beginning. How did the rest go?"

"That's as far as I got," admitted Marais a little lamely. "I didn't know what to say next. But I've had lots of fun since just making my heroine do all sorts of things."

Dan turned full upon her, his moodiness vanished. "Doing things." His voice trembled in its earnestness. "That's me. I want to build a bridge as big as—Brooklyn Bridge. Only in some other country. Wouldn't it be great? A lot better'n studying musty old law books. Sometimes I think—I just—won't—do—it." His jaw set in a square, stubborn line.

Marais nodded in an ecstasy of understanding. Of course Dan must learn to build bridges in strange countries like—Africa. Nothing must stand in his way. Only he'd have to go so far off. But—wasn't she ashamed of herself?—his career mustn't be thwarted. How was President Stillman to be won over? He had the same jutting forehead and square jaw that Dan had. A pretty hard nut to crack, she'd heard her mother say. She leaned back with half-closed eyes, reveling in the luxury of planning Dan's future. Her abstracted gaze caught the tail end of a white fairy frigate sailing behind a cottonwood leaf. If she leaned back a little more, she could catch another glimpse of it.

"Don't do that," cried Dan, still frowning.

"I'm all right." Marais was suddenly resentful at his tone of authority.

He put out his hand. "Marais, you mustn't——"

"Let me alone." She twitched perversely away from his grasp.

Splash! A wild scream, the blue and green and white world all upside down, and the next moment she was floundering in the ditch.

"It isn't deep. Here, take hold of my hand!" shouted Dan, wading in from the bank to which he had leaped.

He dragged her out of the water, a piteous little

figure with drowned hair and streaming dress clinging to her soaked body.

"Oh, Dan, what will mother say?" she wailed, salty tears mingling with the water which flowed down her cheeks.

He was on his knees scraping the chunks of wet clay from her shoes. "Never mind. I'll tell her it was all my fault. But why didn't you listen to me, Marais?" He sat back on his heels, his muddy stick in the air.

"Because I hate to be bossed around," sobbed Marais. "I didn't think you'd ever do it."

Dan still looked puzzled, but he only said, "You sit in the sun. It'll dry you off in a jiffy. I don't know about this." He looked doubtfully at the silk dress, now a slimy saffron.

Marais was shaking with a sick certainty. All Mrs. Fowler's kindly, regretful efforts to comb her lank hair, clean her dress, and dry her shoes and stockings only consumed the moments piling up the retribution waiting for her at home. Even toast and tea didn't break the chill that made her teeth chatter in her head.

As the buckboard drew up in front of Mrs. Plover's house, she was standing white and erect in the door.

"Come on, Marais. Don't be scared. Your mother'll understand," whispered Dan as he took her cold hand to help her to the ground.

The culprits walked slowly up the front steps.

"How-d'y-do, Mrs. Plover," began Dan. "I'm—we—I asked Marais to go to Fowler's and she fell in the ditch."

"So I see." Mrs. Plover cast a satirical glance at the limp, bilious dress.

"It was all my fault." He moistened his lips. "I'm awfully sorry."

There was a short silence. Dan shifted his position. Marais remained miserably still. Mrs. Plover didn't take her eyes from the two. Finally she spoke. "My brother and Professor Timorson have been scouring the country for hours. I didn't dare to think what might have happened to Marais. Do you know it's four o'clock and I haven't seen her since nine this morning?"

Dan quailed before these unanswerable facts. Then his jaw took a stubborn line. "Mrs. Plover," he pleaded doggedly, rumpling his hair, "don't blame Marais. She was walking home from Sunday school, and I got her——"

Mrs. Plover interrupted him. "That'll do, Dan. I've no doubt you're sorry. But you must remember Marais is nothing but a little girl and doesn't know how to conduct herself when she goes out with boys. She'd probably have stayed out till night." She turned to the child who shrank away from Dan at her mother's words. "Marais, go straight upstairs and take off those wet things; then get into bed."

Dan started awkwardly down the steps. Then he faced about. "Good-by, Marais." He looked at the bedraggled little figure.

"Good-by, Dan." Marais raised her eyes long enough to catch his strengthening look.

In her room she took off her damp, stained garments and hung them over the chairs and the table. What a contrast to the crisp preparations of the

morning! Finally she put on her nightgown and sat on the edge of the bed staring at the door. For a long time she stayed there, listening. Throughout the house reigned a deathly stillness. The minutes dragged by. They stretched into hours. Her fear of the unknown punishment looming before her became numbed by her utter weariness. It dulled her smarting humiliation at being sent to bed before Dan. By and by she quit whispering, "It never would have happened if it hadn't been for the April Fool picnic. Oh, if mother only hadn't said I didn't know how to act with boys."

After a while she climbed into bed, the premonition of to-morrow's chastisement still heavy on her tired mind. But deep in her heart, deeper than her conviction that the fatal April Fool picnic was the cause of all her trouble, throbbed the joy of her adventure with Dan—the ride to Fowler's, the slide in the hay, their talk in the old cottonwood with the water slipping greenly away beneath them to the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow. The enchanted day! Not all the punishments in the world could take it away from her.

CHAPTER IV

SACRIFICERS TO BAAL

EVEN with the coming of Sydney the Nemesis of the April Fool picnic seemed to dog Marais. It wasn't until after the Native Sons' affair that she was freed from it. Every night for two weeks before her friend's arrival, she had fallen asleep with a clear, light singing in her heart. Every morning when the pale shafts of dawn slid through the sword leaves of her father's tall palm tree and touched her eyelids, she sat up in bed, whispering, "One day less till Sydney comes. Goody, goody!" Finally, too good to be true, "She'll be here to-day, this very morning." For seven whole days she was to be right across the street at her Grandfather Wentworth's. Sydney in and out of the big house, her yellow hair flying, her eyes, brown as velvet butterflies that hovered over the cannas in Marais's back yard, snapping with excitement one minute, drowned in tenderness the next.

And whenever she looked across the street at the great stone house with its white-trimmed bay windows and imposing flight of granite steps among the forest of trees and shrubbery, Marais sighed happily that Sydney should visit in a place so beautiful. The Wentworth mansion had always been wrapped in a veil of romance for her. On summer nights when the moon swung up beyond the eucalyptus plumes, she sat on her front steps and quoted:

Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat, night, has flown,

from Tennyson's poem Professor Timorson was having the class paraphrase. Or she strolled by the frosted iron gates beyond which the circular driveway shone like snow and the bronze Pan in the middle of the sloping lawn danced beneath the curtain of ivy drooping from the oaks and blew diamonds drops from his reed instrument.

Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone.

A dozen spots in the recesses of the grounds might have served beautifully as the trysting place of Maud and her lover—of anybody and her lover. The dim aisles beneath the palms and laurestinus bushes where daisies, violets, and forget-me-nots slept. The Lost Garden whose high cypress hedge had often hidden Marais and Sydney from Mrs. Dalrymple's worried, absent-minded search.

But when Marais walked with Sydney through the parlors whose heavy, walnut furniture and gilt-framed portraits were shaded by long lace curtains in front of the Venetian blinds, it seemed nobody lived in their huge, shadowy spaces. And nobody but Mr. Wentworth had, ever since Marais could remember. Although she and Sydney never spoke of it, she knew from her mother the story of how, thirty years before, his young wife had gone suddenly mad. "Raving crazy in the wink of an eye. He was sitting in the library reading one winter night when all of a sudden he heard something, and there stood Sydney Wentworth, her eyes blazing,

the meat ax in both hands, ready to send him to kingdom come. Mad as a hatter. She always was flighty. Sydney is her living image. Of course they took her to the asylum. They say she goes on terribly when its stormy." Marais pictured the poor creature pressing her tangled, golden head against iron bars and staring upon a drenched and hopeless world, and was glad when she heard Mrs. Wentworth was at last out of her misery. Every time she saw Mr. Wentworth's well set-up figure and handsome, florid face with the eyes a little too close together, the lips a bit too thick and red, she felt sorry for him. How could she know he had utilized the fact of his mad wife so long as a protection in the affairs he conducted with his "lovely lady friends" as he called them, that her death made small difference in the habit?

While Mr. Wentworth was proud of his granddaughter he was stricter than even Marais's own mother. At a pay performance for heathen missions given by the Baptist Sunday school in the spacious Wentworth parlors when Marais and Sydney were both twelve years old, Sydney was to play "La Paloma" on the golden harp her grandfather had given her. As she seated herself at the instrument a toss of her head had caught her bright hair in the strings, and in trying to loosen it, she had burst into peals of laughter. The next moment Mr. Wentworth had stridden across the polished floor, his ruddy face as black as a thundercloud. "Hush, Sydney! Do you hear me?" His tone had reduced the whole room to silence. But after Mrs. Plover had taken the matter in hand, Sydney's locks were released, and the strains of the old Spanish

melody floated through the room, Marais saw his eyes shine as he straightened himself proudly against the wall as much as to say, "That's my granddaughter. I bought her the harp. I'm seeing that she has lessons from the best teacher in San Francisco."

At the conclusion of the program Sydney had walked up to Marais. "You live across the street," she announced. "I've seen you through the fence. Why don't you come over? I like you." And Marais could scarcely believe her ears when Mrs. Dalrymple, an absent-minded widow with harassed eyes and loops of auburn hair over her ears, repeated her daughter's invitation to Mrs. Plover. "Marais is such a well-mannered child. She may be an example to Sydney. Sometimes I don't know what to do with her." She sighed.

Thus the two became friends. From the beginning, however, Sydney established herself the leader while Marais remained the breathless listener. When she beheld Sydney's navy blue sailor suit and long, black stockings flying up the steps of the big house the afternoon of her arrival, she could scarcely wait to finish dusting the sitting-room.

Half an hour later as the two walked arm in arm toward the Lost Garden, Sydney's grandfather halted her from the steps. "Remember, Sydney, no running around on Central Avenue and talking to the boys. Tough crowd in town to-day on account of the picnic. Do you hear me?"

Sydney's sullen, muffled "Yes, sir," was like the premonitory rumbling to the volcanic wrath which burst from her when she and Marais were hidden within the evergreen enclosure. "I'll do as I

please," she exclaimed violently, facing her friend. "I'll show my grandfather. It's always 'don't, don't, don't' when I come to this place until I wish I'd never seen it. Just you wait till I'm grown up." Her breast began to heave.

"What'll you do, Sydney?"

Sydney threw wide her arms. "I'll never marry any man and let him rule me with a rod of iron. And I'll—I'll go to the ends of the earth."

"And then what?" Marais leaned forward in her eagerness to penetrate deeper into this ample, nebulous future.

"Oh, I don't know," Sydney shrugged her shoulders. Then catching sight of the troubled shadow in Marais's eyes, with a rush she threw her arms about her friend's neck. "There's one thing I'll always do. I'll love you as long as I live. And if I go far, far away, you have to come too." The next moment she had pranced away. "Let's have some fun." She whirled round and round like a golden-headed dervish. "Can't we do something different?" Her restless eyes roved over the garden. Suddenly she broke off humming "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-night." "Suppose we take a walk down by the grammar school and see some of the new boys at recess. I'm glad your old Parnassus College is having a vacation. I like grammar school better, anyway. Come along, Marais."

Marais hesitated. "But, Sydney, your grandfather said——"

"He said not to go on Central Avenue. The grammar school's on First Street. Marais, for once in your life don't be a 'fraid cat and come along."

As the two girls looked through the picket fence into the grammar school grounds just around the corner from Central Avenue and the California Winery, Marais felt like a fish out of water.

"Let's not go in," she demurred as Sydney started toward the gate.

Sydney wheeled about. "Marais, you always spoil everything. Oh, look, there's that boy, Preston Marbury." She clutched Marais's arm as the pupils poured down the steps for recess. "I had such a good time with him last December. He sees us too. Look, he's waving. Wait a minute." She slid through the posts and ran to meet him.

Marais was consumed with sudden shyness. Previous to her admiration for Dan she had been fascinated by the debonair swarthinness of this boy whose family lived in an interesting old house in the Coast Range foothills twelve miles from Oakleyville. People said they were Easterners of English descent who had moved to California after a crash in their fortunes which had undermined Mr. Marbury's health. Wherever Preston went the girls were crazy about him. It was too bad that he attended the grammar school while most of the Parnassus College students belonged to the Baptist Church. But Marais was glad because she knew that if Preston had gone to the Baptist Sunday school, he would have ignored her and she had preferred to worship without that sting. Now, however, he meant nothing to her except that she didn't want to be reminded of her fruitless devotion. From Sydney's sparkling eyes and quickly moving hands it was evident he had suggested something which aroused her interest.

In a moment she had danced back to her friend. "Oh, Marais, just guess. Preston's going to take us to the Native Sons' Picnic. He's gone to get Bob Zimmerman and his surrey now. Isn't that too marvelous for words?"

Marais stood in her tracks. The Native Sons' Picnic, attended by all the godless people in the country, with its gambling games, its dancing, its drinking——

"Well, you may be going," she said doggedly, "but I'm not. I'm going home."

Sydney's flaming cheeks turned white. "Marais Plover, if you don't go, I'll never speak to you as long as I live."

Marais trembled at this threatened excommunication, but shook her head. "I can't help it, Sydney. Mother would never forgive me——"

Scorn flashed from Sydney's eyes. "Can't go to the Native Sons' Picnic. Can't go to the grammar school. No wonder the boys never have anything to do with you."

The blood burned in Marais's cheeks. Sometimes Sydney didn't care what she said.

Without a second's warning, Sydney burst into wild tears. "All right," she sobbed. "If you don't go, I can't. You're just like all the rest of them. Don't, don't, don't."

Marais hesitated. How could she go to the Native Sons' Picnic which her mother, her grandmother, and, indeed, all Oakleyville churchgoers, considered a hotbed of iniquity? Yet—she looked miserably at the shaking figure—she couldn't ruin Sydney's pleasure. When she was going to be in Oakleyville for only a week too. And besides that,

she hadn't gone to the April Fool picnic. And mother had never appreciated what a disappointment it was.

"Don't cry, Sydney," she gulped, "I'll—I'll go."

All the way out to Levitt's Grove Marais, seated beside Bob Zimmerman, was haunted by one phrase of Sydney's taunt. It stung like a poisoned arrow in her whirling thought. "No wonder the boys never have anything to do with you." She cast a despairing glance at the fat, pimply-faced boy whose eyes blinked stupidly as he guided his horse among the hacks, buggies, surreys, and queens streaming toward the picnic grounds. In the depths of her somber eyes dawned a determined gleam. Since she had paid the price of her soul in coming to this spot of mad races and mad carousals, if it was within human power, she was going to learn the secret of popularity.

"Do—do you like picnics?" She edged timidly a little nearer Bob's stolid figure.

But he was too busy turning in at the big entrance gate to hear her. As they drove to an open space where throngs of people moved about on the straw thrown down as a protection from the dust, she was too overwhelmed by the sound of the voice thundering in her breast, "You're in hell. Just to spite your mother because she wouldn't let you go to the April Fool picnic. Do you look upon the work of the devil with pleasure?" to repeat her attempt at coquetry.

She wished she was like Sydney, affected by no such warning of her conscience. The music, the moving crowd, the adventure were evidently wine to her pulses. With starry eyes she led the party from

one thrilling spectacle to another. It was all Preston could do to keep her from attempting to climb the greased pole, and she did try her luck without avail in the potato race.

Finally they found their way to the dance platform, a circular structure on whose smooth floor shadows of oak branches wove a delicate, moving tracery. Marais followed the others without a word. Having gone so far, a step deeper into sin made very little difference. In the beginning she could scarcely bring herself to follow the circling figures. Hadn't Brother Hartleb said the very attitude they assumed was a disgrace? She couldn't imagine what he meant, but a statement like that from the pulpit must be true. It was funny that she liked to watch the motions of the gliding couples. There was Miss "Dot" Farley, the prettiest young lady in Oakleyville, dancing with Mr. Dwight Brockett. She swayed just like a tall bluebell in a breeze. And through the crowd she caught a glimpse of Uncle Webb watching the two with strange, hungry eyes. But she shrank behind Bob's thick shoulder before he had time to see her and come over to inquire what on earth she was doing there.

When Preston jumped up and pulled Sydney out on the floor among the dancers, she was left alone with Bob Zimmerman. At first she amused herself watching them circling their way among the throng, marveling at Sydney's grace and agility. At a stirring of the stolid figure beside her she realized that here was another opportunity to practice conversation with boys.

"It's fun to watch them dance, isn't it?" she of-

ferred. Why didn't he wipe off that drop of perspiration swinging from the end of his nose?

"Uh-huh!"

"See that fat man. Isn't he killing. He shakes all over like a mound of jelly."

Bob peered at the toiling figure. "That's my cousin," he remarked heavily.

Marais subsided in a limp heap. Sydney's words were true. She was a total failure with boys. She sat looking straight ahead of her with hot eyes.

Suddenly a commotion on the band stand, a discordant figure breaking the rhythm of the dancers, caught her attention. At the same moment Bob Zimmerman, all at once alive, nudged her violently. "Looky there! Looky there!" he whispered excitedly.

It was Mr. Wentworth in riding coat and gaiters striding across the platform regardless of the amazed lane he was mowing through the crowd. People shrank away from the congested face and clenched hand which held his riding whip.

Sydney saw him before he reached her. But she lifted her shoulders defiantly as she whirled around and around in the arms of the unconscious Preston. It wasn't until her grandfather jerked her from her partner that she faced him squarely. As she did so, Marais saw—Oh, why was Sydney so reckless?—that the bravado of her shoulders was repeated in her shining eyes and the naughty smile which curled her lips. Not even the lowering face of her grandfather whose fingers twitched at the handle of his whip, nor the gazing dancers had power to daunt Sydney. Her feet still kept time to the music as her brown eyes defied John Wentworth, in their depths

a thousand dancing devils. Marais turned her head away as he bent forward, his hand raised.

When she looked again the ocean of dancers had swept over the spot where they had stood. But above the braying two-step music she caught a fragment of talk between a full-breasted woman seated next to Bob and her neighbor: "The old gentleman'd better keep the upper hand of her. She'll go wild like her grandmother. You know she——"

The rest of the afternoon's experience remained a blur in Marais's mind, shot with needle points of anguished sensation. Silence—the spectators straggling out—the lengthening shadows of oak branches on the platform—the flagging dancers—her trembling query, "Bob, will you take me home?"—his answer, "Let's get something to eat first. I'm hungry as a wolf." Marais's first consciousness of the odor of barbecued meat. *What about dinner at home and that look on her mother's face?*

Herself seated on a remote bench, waiting; Bob stumbling toward her with two dripping, meat sandwiches; her wave of nausea at the crunching sound he made in eating; his silly grin as he wiped his greasy mouth; her second attempt. "We'd better go now. It's 'way after six o'clock." His lurching awkwardly toward her, his perspiring hand on her waist. "Aw, give me a kiss, Marais. Let's have some fun, anyway."

Her inarticulate cry; her flight through the dark trees till she stumbled over a stump at the very edge of the picnic ground; her sob of relief to escape those wet, thick lips and his jeer in her ears, "I thought that's what you was workin' up to."

Darkness; her heart keeping time to the thumping

frogs in some cat-tail swamp near by; the flame of the bonfire, against its flickering light the grotesque shapes of the picnickers at the barbacue—wicked sacrificers to Baal, eating defiled meat, and she no better than they. Hadn't she yielded to Sydney's persuasions? Hadn't she watched the dancers? Hadn't she disobeyed her mother and egged Bob Zimmerman on? Punishment came swiftly to the wicked.

The crackle of a twig; the tears frozen on her cheeks; the ceasing of the frogs' muffled drumming; the cold, winking stars millions of miles away through the enlaced boughs; dim tree trunks beginning to take strange shapes; faint, dreadful footsteps approaching stealthily; something black looming among the shadows, something terrifyingly real—Two blazing eyes staring straight into hers! An icy hand brushing her brow!

Marais stumbled to her feet. This time she ran toward the light, Oh, so welcome even if it was the fire of hell, ran as fast as her legs would carry her. Didn't stop until, within the friendly radius of Hades, she sank shuddering at a man's feet.

It was Uncle Webb's face which looked with startled eyes into her wild ones. His cheek was pressed against hers while she sobbed out her incoherent story. He comforted her with the assurance that Mr. Wentworth hadn't whipped Sydney, but merely taken her home, that the cause of her panic was only Dwight Brockett's friendly water spaniel. She lay in his arms by the fire while kind hands rubbed the warmth back into her chilled body and pressed hot coffee to her lips. And finally she

was conscious that her uncle lifted her into his buggy and tucked the robe tenderly about her tired body.

As they rode home through the darkness behind Black Bess, above them the scudding stars, now warm and friendly, Marais felt his protective tenderness envelop and surround and lap her in a great peace. Here she was just as she had dreamed, riding with him behind Black Bess into the night. Between the two there sprang into being one of those moments of understanding in which heart answers heart and a kinship deeper than blood asserts itself. "Oh, Uncle Webb, I love you so!" It was a balm to Marais's sore spirit, in a way made up for her back-sliding and the punishment she knew awaited her at home. Finally she sank into high, opal-colored billows of sleep from which she didn't quite emerge even when Black Bess stopped at her mother's gate. But dimly she knew that Uncle Webb lifted her gently from the buggy. From a great distance came his voice. "Now, Augusta, it was all my fault. She's been with me." Drowsily she was conscious that he was speaking that way to shield her, that the real cause of her going had been that April Fool picnic. It seemed to be at the bottom of all her trouble.

But she'd been with Uncle Webb on a wild, dark ride, behind Black Bess, above them the scudding stars. She slept again.

CHAPTER V

BRIDGING THE AMAZON—AND THE YEARS

How fast the years flew by! One—two—three.

Marais at fifteen, half a head taller than when she had sat, with that sickening shyness striking her in the pit of the stomach, beside Bob Zimmerman on their way to the Native Sons' Picnic, was going ahead by leaps and bounds at Parnassus. Working out problems in plane geometry with Dan's help, interpreting "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro" with a delicacy of perception that drew precise commendation from Professor Timorson. Sometimes when they talked about her work he looked at her in a way that made her flush uncomfortably. It was awfully stupid, too, that Anne Brisbane Banks should continue to greet her with a glare, though her hatred was more understandable since Marais had stumbled unexpectedly upon the vice principal tiptoeing into the little professor's room with a La France rose in a crystal vase. You didn't dare to feel sorry for Miss Banks; she'd have scratched your eyes out. But you couldn't help having a catch in your throat every time you saw Cousin Jaquith's white face. She had just promised to marry Abner and mother was so pleased that she told everybody about the fine match her husband's niece was making. Engaged people ought to be so happy that they'd see the whole world through a silver shimmer. It was going to be that way with her. Some-

times even now, College Street, the arching trees in Mr. Wentworth's garden, the dust, the very faces of the people who passed her seemed illuminated by a radiance that didn't come from the sun, and made her eyes smart and her heart jump for joy. But she'd learned to keep such impressions to herself. Her mother would have said, "Get those silly notions out of your head and tend to business, Marais."

Marais at sixteen was really growing up. Her chestnut hair hung in a thick braid that Young John called "old horse's tail" when she made him mad. Her face was uncommonly vivid, perhaps from the sudden vermilion of her lips against her skin's healthy pallor and the dark band her green-gray eyes made beneath her wide, candid forehead. She stood one afternoon early in May talking to Dan Stillman who had strolled home with her from school and leaned against Mrs. Plover's gatepost idly watching Young John constructing a graveyard in the front walk.

"Just think! In four months you'll be in college," she remarked, looking into the creamy heart of a Maréchal Niel rose she had picked from the bush beside her.

"And next year you'll be there and I'll show you the ropes." Dan's face, somber in repose, broke into its rare smile and his eyes swam in that light that made them look like black stars in a clear pool of water.

"Marais, look what you've gone an' done!" Marais started at the yell of rage behind her.

She stared down dazedly from Young John's convulsed face to the rows of tiny dirt mounds about

which he was building a fence of sticks and string. Three crushed graves bore the imprint of her shoe.

"I'm sorry, but you ought to make your cemetery in the back yard," observed she severely.

"I'm goin' to tell mamma on you." Tears streamed down his hot, dusty cheeks, and he started around the house.

Of course now mother'd know Dan was at the front gate and would say when she went in the house, "It doesn't look very well for you and Dan Stillman to hang on the front gate in plain view of everybody. And I should think you could get along for once in your life without starting Young John off."

Marais is mad,
And I am glad,
And I know what will please her.
A bottle of wine
To make her shine,
And Danny Stillman to squeeze her.

Young John's taunting voice wafted to them from the back yard. Crimson flooded Marais's face to the tips of her ears. Goodness, if ever she got hold of that kid!

"Timorson's coming. Guess I'll be off." Dan swung his strapped books over his shoulder.

But the little professor halted them both. The contrast between his yellow, withered skin and small figure and Dan's youthful bigness and fresh-colored, strong face with its tumble of dark hair smote Marais sharply. It must be awful to get old.

"I'm fortunate to have found you two together," he began in his careful way. "The Drama Committee has decided to give 'The Merchant of Venice'

for Commencement. Dan, you're chosen for the part of Shylock. And Marais," his tired eyes lingered on her tall young form, "you are to do Portia."

She drew in her breath sharply. Practices with Dan—many of them; the Opera House ablaze with lights; filled with an admiring throng; herself the center of the stage. Her eyes swam with happy, stinging tears which didn't fall but formed in each eye a shaky lens through which Dan, Professor Timorson, the rosebush quivered in brilliant uncertainty.

After the little professor had gone in the house and Dan, saying good-by, had swung off, whistling, she lingered at the gate.

Clop-clop, clop-clop. Around the corner, plump into her dream of happiness, trotted Black Bess, and in the shining, new, rubber-tired, wheeled buggy Uncle Webb bent his glowing face toward a graceful pink figure. The third time that week he had Miss Dot Farley out driving. Marais waved as they skimmed by, watching them disappear around Mr. Wentworth's corner into the shimmer of the sunset.

She knew what that look meant, that flushed, triumphant, humble look which had replaced the hard recklessness in Uncle Webb's eye. Ever since he'd begun taking Dot Farley about he had been a different person. No more fooling around with the gang, gambling at the Central House, stumbling home in the early hours of the morning. If Grandmother Haliburton saw little of him, she could at least be assured that every spare moment he had Black Bess was tied at "Doc" Farley's front gate.

A tiny frown ruffled the smoothness of Marais's

forehead. Miss Farley was as pretty as a Howard Chandler Christy girl, dressed exquisitely, and carried herself with the cool self-possession of a young duchess. But one heard stories of the young lady's selfishness, and Marais had seen with her own eyes how she had turned her back on the woman Salome Buford the night of the Eastern Star social when Salome was taking some cakes she'd baked up to the Masonic Hall. Dot Farley, who was on her way to the dressing-room, needn't have spoken, but she didn't have to pick up her skirts and turn her back as if she was afraid of contamination from the heavy, unobtrusive Salome. Her action made Marais's blood boil now. "Still, if Uncle Webb loves her," she thought, "I ought to think all the nice things I can about her. Her hair is lovely, the way it grows in that peak on her forehead. And she's got a mouth like a rosebud. But I believe the very nicest is the perfume she always uses. 'La Violette Parisienne.' No wonder she can drench herself in the most expensive kind when her father keeps a drug store."

"The Merchant of Venice" was a sweeping success. When the final curtain fell, punctuation mark to two solid months of practicing, Marais, still in her blue satin gown which defined the clear oval of her face and her long-limbed grace, felt as though she'd like to sink and fly at the same time. But it was great fun to have people crowding about her with compliments. Only one thing needed to complete the evening's triumph. Wouldn't it be fun if her mother, coming toward her through the press, that company smile lighting up her strong features,

should put her arm about her and whisper, "It was wonderful, dear."

"Marais, I'm going on with Jaquith and Abner. Professor Timorson says you may come home with him." That was all from Mrs. Plover, whose pride in Marais's performance was equaled only by her rigid refusal to praise her own children in public.

Marais opened her mouth to reply, but her mother had already moved on in the crowd. Well, she'd just explain to Professor Timorson that Dan was going to walk home with her. Why, they'd had it arranged for weeks. But when she had put on her everyday clothes and rubbed off the grease paint with cold cream, there stood Professor Timorson by the dressing-room door and every one else was gone. Had Dan forgotten? She walked along beside the little professor, holding her eyes wide open so that the tears wouldn't spill over and run down her cheeks still smarting from their hasty scrubbing. You didn't cry when you were sixteen years old. But how could she listen to Professor Timorson's ponderous talk to-night, of all nights?

He was so uncommunicative, however, that finally even she was puzzled. At Mrs. Plover's gate he stopped abruptly. "Marais, Marais, I don't know how to thank you."

She peered at him in the starlight, struck by the huskiness of his tone. "What for?"

"For your work to-night. When Dan told me he was waiting for you, I asked him to let me bring you home. I wanted to tell you."

So it was his fault Dan hadn't waited! An angry lump rose in Marais's throat. "I didn't do any more than the others," she said brusquely.

He came a step closer. "You—you were the inspiration of the whole play. It would have been a failure without you." It sounded exactly as if he sobbed. "I wonder if you have any idea how happy you made me."

What was the matter with the man? He looked at her so strangely. Suddenly he put his hands on her shoulders, his touch burning through her dress. "You were so beautiful to-night, Marais. I—I—" He threw his arms around her and held her so close that she could feel his heart thudding against her throat. Then he lowered his head until his breath touched her lips.

All the heaviness dropped away from Marais like a garment. With one wrench of her strong young arms she tore herself from his embrace. "Don't you dare. Don't you dare," she whispered.

When she reached her room she stood in the middle of the floor, her hand tightly clasped over her mouth. "If he had kissed me, I should have killed him on the spot," she gasped. She flung herself on her bed and hid her burning face in the pillows. Every inch of her body shrank from the thought of the attempted caress.

Presently she got up and went over to the window to cool her throbbing temples. While she leaned her head against the screen she heard voices outside, with a start recognized Dan's voice, and tried to make out his figure in the darkness. He'd come by her house, hoping to see her, and there was Professor Timorson hanging around like an old night owl. She knew just how Dan felt. That they'd been cheated out of their walk home together. What was he saying?

"Law! I hate the sound of the word. If I have to wade through those great books I might as well go bury myself under so many slabs of stone. I'm not going to do it."

Marais could picture his grim expression, the black brows drawn together over the heavily clouded eyes, the jaw set in that unyielding line.

"Don't you want to go to college?" Professor Timorson's tone was puzzled.

"Not now." Dan's reply came swiftly. "First I want to live among people in other places and do things—with my hands. I like to work that way. I wish my father could see it."

"But wouldn't it be wiser to go to college first and make contacts with people later?"

"Not if I don't know what I want to do. Taking a year or two off will give me an idea of what I can do."

Marais straightened up. Her mind was awlirl with resentful bewilderment. How could Dan discuss so coolly with Professor Timorson the probability of not going to college when he and she had talked of the fun they were to have there together?

"Had you ever thought of civil engineering?" asked Professor Timorson. "You're clever in mathematics. There is a great demand for engineers with all the railroads and bridges and dams being planned, not only in this country, but in Europe and in South America."

Marais jumped to her feet, her hands clenched against her sides. She listened breathlessly for his answer.

"Wouldn't that be great! Europe, South Amer-

ica, to build a bridge across the Amazon. Gee, I'll do it."

She sat motionless beside the window. Dan going to South America to build a bridge across the Amazon!

Marais at seventeen thought she was going to be terribly lonely with Dan away at the University of California for his freshman year filled, according to his letters, with work and football and—surprisingly enough—singing in the Glee Club. She might have dreamed that conversation between him and Professor Timorson for all the effect it had on his going to college. As for loneliness she didn't reckon on her busy, senior year at Parnassus, the boarders at home, and her unflagging interest in the culminating affair between her uncle and Miss Farley. Following Mrs. Plover's code the matter was never mentioned between her and Marais. But when she called up the stairs to her daughter one Saturday morning in May—a wonderful day, the day Dan was to return from college for the summer vacation—"Marais, we'll go downtown this morning to pay bills and select the things for dinner tomorrow. I've invited Miss Farley and her father and your grandmother and Uncle Webb," the girl knew it was a tacit announcement that the wedding day was not far off.

After she was dressed she stood a moment at her window, like a sheathed lily in her green and white sun hat, her eyes on the flash of snowy pigeons' wings in the Wentworth gardens. Life was certainly a wonderful process. Wasn't Sydney coming soon to Oakleyville for the Hawaiian fête her

grandfather was planning in honor of his recent trip to Honolulu? Dan with three of his friends—she had the letter telling the great news locked in her desk—was already on his way home. And now Uncle Webb had gained his heart's desire.

But as she passed through the hall her eyes fell on the door of what had once been Professor Timorson's room. The lonely little man had left Oakleyville immediately after the play to teach in the Oakland high school. She missed his encouraging words about her compositions. The picture of his placing his books on new shelves, beginning his walks over unfamiliar streets, stung her eyes with tears. Of course those were other aspects of the shield. The trapped look in Jaquith's face, Professor Timorson's loneliness——

As she and her mother walked beneath the full-leaved poplars and the locusts bordering College Street, she forgot her reflections in the thrilling possibility that she might catch a glimpse of Dan on his way home from the station. On Central Avenue she moved past "Doc" Farley's drug store with its shining marble-topped soda-fountain counter as spick and span as Miss Dot's appearance, past the undertaking parlor of Dwight Brockett, Uncle Webb's great friend, behind whose plate-glass window floated a dove bearing in its beak the golden slogan, "Your future home," moved to the rhythm of her thought. "His train comes about noon. Oh, won't it be joyful, joyful, joyful?"

At Hay Spinkham's grocery store Ed Shellhammer and Jo Muffley, the harassed clerks, found time even in the midst of their Saturday rush to call out to her mother, "Fine day, ma'am," and, "Morning,

Mrs. Plover." Even in Marais's absorption she noticed that Hay Spinkham himself, known as the most irritable and blasphemous merchant on the avenue, quit biting his dyed mustache long enough to pass a word with her mother. "Finest woman in the county, by God! Holds her head high, keeps that house of hers clear of debt, and brings up her kids like a Haliburton ought."

The only person in the establishment who never looked at her or anybody else, for that matter, was Jerome Buford, Salome Buford's brother. His shabby shoulder was white from the sacks of flour under which he humped from the store to the delivery wagon he had driven for the past five years at thirty-five dollars a month. He was forty years old, of furtive eyes, gray hair in a rabbit tufts about his temples, and wiry frame. It was a question whether his sullen moodiness was shame because he had such a notorious sister as Salome Buford who would have had to live in that queer place down by the railroad known as Hiller Town with all the bleached women in Mother Hubbards if he hadn't given her a home. Salome herself might have given another reason for his taciturnity.

On the way up the winding, wooden stairs to the cashier's desk, Marais could see Jerome Buford's bent figure in the dim rear of the store amidst the sacks of potatoes and flour and tiers of canned goods. He was standing still, listening in a threatening attitude to Salome talking to him rapidly in a low tone. She laid her hand on his arm and Marais saw him shake it off fiercely. Then the turn in the stairway hid them. And the next moment the electric light shone familiarly on the bald head and phil-

osopher's face of Lemuel Bean, the bookkeeper, bending over his eternal figures. Mrs. Plover was in the act of inquiring after the sixth Bean baby when Marais, watching the panorama in the busy store beneath, exclaimed, "Oh, mother, there's Uncle Webb talking to Mr. Spinkham. I'm going down to see him."

A little later when Mrs. Plover joined the group Marais noted the pride in her light eyes as she viewed her brother, unusually handsome in a new spring suit of gray with a pink carnation in his buttonhole. At that moment Salome Buford passed them, a commonplace, heavy figure in her black dress, shabby hat with its limp pansies, and stout, ugly shoes. Marais was sure she saw tears on the woman's cheeks. He raised his broad-brimmed, gray hat and bowed deferentially. Hay Spinkham clipped, "Day, Salome." Mrs. Plover busied herself inspecting the new patterns of cut glass in the show case. The woman blocked the bright doorway, her hand fumbling in her bag just as Jerome staggered from the rear of the store under a load of groceries.

"Gangway," cried Hay Spinkham, and the group separated.

Marais caught a glimpse of Jerome's face as he stumped past her. It was sullen, his mouth sagging, an ugly, glazed gleam in his eye. When he neared the door, Salome was still hesitating there.

Hard to tell just how the thing happened. It seemed to Marais that he deliberately collided with his sister who reeled under the impact of the blow, struck against the doorcasing, and sagged to her knees. Breathless, hat awry, her hair falling about

her mottled face, she made a sorry, abased figure crouched there on the dusty floor. But Jerome didn't look in her direction. With a growl he stooped and began scraping together the sugar which had burst from a paper bag just outside the doorway.

In a flash Webb Haliburton was beside Salome, helping her to her feet, brushing the dust from her dress, turning to speak a stern word to Jerome Buford scurrying like a rat among the débris of apples, soap, and broken eggs. He paid no attention to Hay Spinkham's oaths nor to the fact that he had rushed forward and was thrashing the air over Jerome's bent body with his doubled fists. He offered his arm to Salome Buford and without a word to those looking on walked out of the store.

Although Mrs. Plover made her selections for Sunday with the pursed lips and shrewd eyes of a connoisseur, the girl knew that her enthusiasm had been killed. Not even the crispest of lettuce, a new brand of olives, and the best cream cheese Hay Sprinkham had to offer could break the rigid lines of her mouth or erase the mark between her heavy brows.

As the two turned their faces silently toward College Street, the whistle of the Southern Pacific shattered the drowsiness of midday. Marais stole a glance at Mrs. Plover to see if she had caught the significance of that thunder. But her profile was set as sternly as that of the mother of the Gracchi. She was totally unaware that to her daughter's heart it sang, "Dan—Dan's here. Home from college. In the same town with you. On his way right now to his house. You'll see him before night."

All afternoon she dreamed of the circumstances of their first meeting. Maybe he'd drive old Frank up to her front gate, swing himself from the buckboard, and run whistling up the steps. Or he might bring his friends to pay her a formal call.

Five o'clock, and no Dan. Marais surprised Theodore by offering to water the garden. "Never'll do it when I want to go out on a little bust," he growled, relinquishing the hose reluctantly. From behind the acacia tree where she had a full view of College Street she washed the dust from the smilax trained up to the bay window, sprinkled Miss Banks who was trying to keep cool and watch the world by the lowered sash in the shaded parlor, and flooded the front steps. The ribbon of asphalt lay as empty as it had that long-ago day after the April Fool picnickers had sailed by her knothole. Silly of her to imagine she'd see Dan the minute he got home. To-morrow or next day, perhaps, he might drive by and stop for just a second to say hello. Of course he was taken up with his company and his family. What else could she expect? Perhaps—perhaps he hadn't come home yet.

But at dinner Joe Benchley, Abner Jewett's senior clerk, laid down his knife with which he always cut up his salad conspicuously and remarked out of the nowhere, "One feller that college hasn't spoiled so far is Dan Stillman. Met him on the street to-day. Same old Dan. But he's got a crowd with him that'd make you sick. Too smart for words."

So the whistle had told the truth, after all! He had been here all afternoon, on the street, shaking hands with his friends——

After Marais had finished the dishes and had started to her room, her uncle's voice held her arrested in the hall. "But Augusta, you wouldn't have me do less for a dog. That was a terrific blow Jerome gave her."

Mrs. Plover's voice cut in upon his expostulation. "Well, you needn't have made your aid so conspicuous. Didn't you drive her home right down Central Avenue?"

"Of course I did. Why not?"

His sister spoke firmly. "You know how easily people talk. And now that you and Dot are engaged——"

"Damn people's talking. Their infernal gossip would set a man crazy."

Mrs. Plover's voice was coldly steady. "Do you think Miss Farley would like to know how many times Black Bess has been tied at Salome Buford's gate during the past two years?"

"Dot"—Marais's eyes blurred at the change in his tone—"Dot would understand if I explained. She always does."

His niece went into her room and closed the door softly behind her, that deep note still ringing in her ears. She threw open the window and the evening air touched her hot face. Then she slipped on a white organdie dress cut square in the neck and wound her braided hair about her head as she had worn it in "The Merchant of Venice." But though she drew her chair resolutely under the light, selected the newest book she had brought home from the library, "The Crisis," by Winston Churchill, its pages remained unturned and from time to time she raised her head as if listening. When the sitting-room

clock struck ten, she put out the gas, crossed the room, and leaned against the window, sighing heavily.

The moon had risen. Its shield of gold swung high athwart the Wentworth oaks whose branches traced zigzag, decorative figures across its yellow face. Many a night Marais had watched its shafts form long aisles of light among their stately trunks back of which the great house rose like an English manor in the saffron glow. The earth slept in infinite repose. Distilled odors of roses, lilies, and orange blossoms floated from the garden beneath. Not a leaf stirred. In the profound stillness a lost bird somewhere in the foliage fluttered once. But the beauty was locked outside Marais's heart. She rested her forehead on the screen. Through its crisscross of wire netting the moon refracted unto a wavering cross and slow tears dropped on her listless hands.

Then suddenly in the clear loveliness, without premonition, trembled soft, elusive sounds. They joined, rose, swelled in harmonious consonance—boyish voices blending on the night air.

Stars of the summer night,
Far in yon azure deeps,
Hide, hide your golden light,
She sleeps, my lady sleeps.

Could it be—yes, it was Dan and his friends! She could see them now in the moonlight, Dan's big shoulders, his face distinct beneath its rumpled hair. Oh, he hadn't forgotten her, after all. Marais drew back in the shadow, a flush tingling to the tears which made of the radiant window a blur.

The melody ceased. There was a brief colloquy. "Now, don't be a nut. Go on." "Well, quit poking me in the ribs or I won't." Stifled laughter. Then a bass voice rose to the window—Dan's voice:

In the sky the bright stars glittered,
On the bank the pale moon shone,
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Marais home.

The other voices took up the chorus:

I was seeing Marais ho-ome,
I was seeing Marais home.
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Marais home.

Marais felt like a princess peering from the latticed casement of her high tower. Oh, for a armful of crimson roses to toss down in silence to her cavaliers! Clapping was too commonplace for such an occasion. While she debated on the proper reception of such a tribute, the quartet took up the burden of its farewell song:

Good night, Marais, good night, Marais,
Good night, Marais,
We're going to leave you now.

They were leaving. She could see them walking away two by two. She clasped her hands. "Don't go. Don't go. I'll never be so happy again."

Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along,
Merrily we roll along, o'er the deep blue sea.

The voices grew fainter and fainter. Finally she could no longer hear them.

For a long time after she went to bed she lay awake. When she slept it was to dream of crimson roses, the golden sheen of moonlight, and Dan's voice:

Good night, Marias,
We're going to leave you now.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOST GARDEN

THE night of John Wentworth's Hawaiian fête, when Marais stood before her mother's tilted mirror in the old walnut bureau which reflected a slender figure in emerald organdie, she couldn't keep her feet from dancing to the tune in her head, "Oh, I never was so happy in my life—life—life." Even her mother's face seen over the shoulder of the image had lost its rigid lines and her voice when she said, "Better stop admiring yourself, Marais, or we'll be late," didn't have a touch of its chiding note. Didn't she, as well as Marais, and the whole town for that matter, know that Mr. Wentworth had hired caterers from Sacramento, that he was to have distinguished guests he'd met on his travels, and had prepared a program including a speech by himself to impress everybody with? Not that those things made Marais's eyes shine and her pulses beat a tattoo clear to the ends of her toes and her fingers. Oh, no, that was because Dan and his three college chums were to be at the party. He had asked to go with her, but Mrs. Plover had shaken her head, "Better for you to come along with me, Marais," and because Sydney, of whom she'd had but one glimpse, had dashed into Mrs. Plover's long enough to say between spasms of hugging Marais, "Look your prettiest, Marais darling. We're going to have the most gorgeous time. Lots of new boys in town, I

hear. But you don't care as long as you have your Danny. Oh, oh!"

The beginning of the evening went well enough. "We'll just walk across," Mrs. Plover had said in planning for the event. "Muggy'll have his hands full, so he won't mind. Besides, it saves four bits." Muggy Abshire, Oakleyville's only hack driver, did have his hands full. As Mrs. Plover and Marais had walked around the circular driveway, he was depositing his twelfth load from his sagging hack at the stately Wentworth steps flanked by the great globes lighted for this signal occasion. The long glass doors behind which lay the mystery and enchantment of Marais's first grown-up party had swung slowly open as the two mounted the last step. The sight of the spacious hall, a fairyland of ferns, roses, and splashes of red and yellow streamers, and the beat upon her ears of languorous, moonlit music, had set her heart throbbing to suffocation. She scarcely saw Mr. Wentworth, resplendent in his evening clothes, nor was conscious of the surprised brightening of his close-set eyes as they rested upon her vivid face. Her acknowledgment of Mrs. Dalrymple's kind, worried greeting was mechanical, for her gaze, like the mother's, was focused upon Sydney, a bright-haired nymph in a golden frock all ruffles and spangles. When her restless eyes fell upon Marais, she had flashed her a brilliant smile and the whisper, "Be with you later, darling," before she turned to greet a swarthy, handsome youth whom Marais on second glance recognized as Preston Marbury, the boy who had enticed Sydney and her to the Native Sons' Picnic. College, she decided

from an instantaneous impression, had accentuated his compact grace and suave self-assurance.

Even after that, Marais, still tingling with expectancy, was content to watch from a corner the advent of the guests into the great rooms, with a swelling of her heart noted the flutter that rippled the group of watchers when Uncle Webb and Miss Dot Farley had appeared in the doorway. All around her she could hear whispered comments:

“Don’t they make a handsome couple?”

“‘Doc’ Farley must have paid a pretty sum for that dress.”

“Engaged, they say.”

“Well, it’s about time Webb Haliburton was giving up his wild oats. I know Augusta Plover’ll be glad to have him settle down.” The two lingering there on the threshold, as if hesitating before merging their wedded life with the unchanging current of Oakleyville affairs—Uncle Webb, debonair and proudly handsome, with no eyes for any one except Miss Farley in gleaming satin beside him, her sleek, little head held in haughty security—blurred before Marais’s eager gaze. “Isn’t it wonderful that things come true in life just as they do in stories?” she thought. *The prince consort offered his arm to the princess with courtly grace, and together they moved down the shining floor to the strains of stately music.*

At this point things began to go awry in breathtaking succession. On the moment she was aware of the entrance of Dan and his friends she saw Mr. Wentworth touch him on the shoulder, introduce him to a heavy-set man who, she learned later, was a celebrated engineer, and the two had walked

away, Dan's face turned eagerly toward that of his new acquaintance. Sydney, the other two boys, and Preston Marbury had disappeared into the conservatory whence issued screams of laughter. And Marais had found herself hopelessly wedged for the program between her mother and Cousin Jaquith.

Another time she would have been entertained by the Hawaiian airs sung by the dark fellows and by the native dances they perpetrated upon the shocked but properly subdued Oakleyville audience. Mr. Wentworth's sketch of his travels, although a trifle pompous and condescending, had held the undivided attention of most of his guests. But Marais was only outwardly interested in high-sounding phrases and in the calabashes and ivories he had brought home so that his less fortunate friends could catch the flavor of the tropics. At the end of the program when he had paused in the crowd to shake hands with Mrs. Plover and to whisper in Marais's ear, "I wonder if you know how pretty you are to-night, my dear," she was scarcely aware of his clasp upon her arm. His next words, however, aroused her stunned disappointment into throbbing activity. "Where's Sydney, Marais? Why aren't you two together?" Then, scanning the knot of people, his eye fell upon his granddaughter in the act of placing with a provocative pat a white flower in Preston Marbury's buttonhole.

"What can be done with such a girl, Mrs. Plover?" he appealed to that lady, vexation tingeing the deep pride in his voice. "Always and eternally with a crowd of boys hanging about her. But she's a pretty fine girl, eh Marais?" He pressed her arm once more so that Marais felt the impulse to jerk

away from his touch. "Have you a supper partner, my dear? I'll send Sydney and Preston over to get you. Know young Marbury, Mrs. Plover? Good head, that lad. He'll make a big business success one of these days." He had moved on with a large wave of his well-kept hand.

Without a word to her mother Marais slipped away. She couldn't endure the toleration of Preston Marbury, bending his close-thatched, raven head to whisper in Sydney's ear, couldn't stand to be forced on her forgetful friend, tried not even to think of Dan. With a hot pain clawing at her heart she had wandered through sheltered alleyways where the pale starriness of flowers along the paths, each needle of the firs, every bending palm was picked out with etched distinctness. And finally she had found herself in the Lost Garden where she and Sydney used to talk so long ago. Nothing here to obstruct the moon's effulgence which poured a flood upon the hard, white ground of the enclosure. The clipped evergreens closed her mercifully from the world.

As she sat on the iron bench, the sense of freedom she had gained in the past two years forsook her as water slips through sand. For Sydney to desert her, and then Dan, made her helpless as her mother's sternness had always done. It repressed her, imprisoned her, killed all the confidence with which she had mounted John Wentworth's steps two hours before. Oh, why couldn't she be like Sydney who didn't give a whoop and drew the whole world irresistibly in her dancing, careless wake? She choked. A tear splashed on her tight-shut hand.

Suddenly voices penetrated her solitude. Then

two people entered the enclosure. One was Webb Haliburton, immaculate in his dress clothes, bare-headed, the moon bright on his white forehead and tossed-back hair. The other was Salome Buford. Always a heavy, uncomely figure, she had never looked like this before. Her calico dress hung half torn from her shoulder. She wore no hat and her hair straggled about her face on which a long dark streak zigzagged from temple to chin.

As he drew her into the hedged circle Salome clung to Webb Haliburton's arm and talked rapidly between convulsive sobs. Neither one perceived Marais who, huddled on the bench, could hear every word they uttered.

"But, Salome," her uncle was expostulating, "I thought you said he was better."

"I thought he was." Salome brushed the hair out of her wet eyes. "After that day at the store he seemed more like himself."

"How did he act yesterday?"

"Just sullen and quiet, the way he does when he's coming out of a spell. Once or twice at lunch I caught him looking at me in the sly way he has when he's taking that stuff. But I never dreamed he had any of it."

Suddenly she covered her face with her hands. "Oh, oh, it's so awful! He was the kindest little boy. And to think I'm afraid to stay in the house with him."

Uncle Webb stroked her arm. "We'll take care of that, Salome. Now tell me what happened to-night."

Salome raised her tear-stained face. "When he came home from work I saw that he had one of his

spells. He wouldn't eat a bite, and began to rave about the Wentworth party. When I went into the kitchen for more coffee, he followed and threatened to kill me and himself. Finally I had to go into my room and lock the door. The neighbors must have heard him. I just can't stand that. No matter what they know about me, I want them to think well of Jerome. Except for this one fault he's been a good brother. And as he has told me so many times, he took to this habit because of me."

Webb silenced her bluntly. "Nonsense! Jerome took dope long before you ever came back to Oakleyville. How did he get into your room, Salome?"

Marais shivered in the warm moonlight at the terror that froze Salome's features. "With the hatchet," she whispered, "and, oh, Webb, when I saw his face through the broken panel of the door, I knew he'd come to kill me. He grazed my temple as I tried to pass him. I don't know how I got out of the house, but you said if I ever needed you—" She clung to him and hid her head on his arm.

"Well, Salome, you're safe now." He patted her heaving shoulders protectingly.

Marais leaned forward. Was the moonlight playing her tricks or had Uncle Webb's face suddenly stiffened to marble? Why was he staring straight over Salome's bent head in that strange way? She stifled a cry. There in the entrance to the Lost Garden stood Miss Dot Farley and Dwight Brockett. Miss Farley's train billowed gracefully over one arm; a whirl of silk tulle misted in a halo about her lovely head. The moon cunningly caught the gleam of her engagement diamond as her hand rested on Dwight Brockett's sleeve.

Salome was the first to break the stillness. At Uncle Webb's sudden rigidity she had raised her scarred and distorted face first to him, then to the two in the opening. "Oh," she gasped, shrinking away from him. "Oh."

But he held her firmly by the arm.

Miss Farley was very white and her lips trembled. She turned to her companion. "It seems we've intruded," she said with distinctness.

Marais never saw any one look so uncomfortable as Dwight Brockett. "I—I wouldn't say that, Dot," he hesitated.

Uncle Webb made an imperceptible motion forward, still retaining his hold on Salome's slack body. "Dot." From his words Marais knew that to him the world was empty except for her and this moment. "Dot, Salome came to me in trouble. She needed my help." There was the lowering of pride, a great throb of appeal in his voice.

A look of distaste stiffened Miss Farley's face. "Shall we go?" said she to Dwight Brockett.

He cleared his throat. "Wouldn't it be well to listen to Webb? He——"

The girl shook her head.

"Never mind, Dwight." Uncle Webb's voice rang out like steel. Marais found herself swallowing the sobs which rose thick in her throat.

When she next looked up the entrance was empty, while Salome Buford gazed fearfully into her uncle's face. And he stared at the blank opening in the green wall as one who has already nothing but memories which he would give his life to forget.

Marais never quite knew how she crept from that spot. Hurry, hurry! Find some hiding place where

he can't hear your sobs. But no sooner was she stumbling along the garden path than she wanted to be back, to explain to Uncle Webb that everything would be all right to-morrow, to find Miss Farley and tell her the facts about Salome Buford. But she was kept from either course by an awful conviction that no explanation could remedy matters now. Something beautiful, fragile as lilies of the valley made of spun glass, had been broken there in the hard, glittering moonlight. And it could never be mended.

She flung herself beneath a remote laurestinus bush and buried her face in the cool grass. Hot tears trickled through her fingers.

All at once a hasty foot crunched the gravel. It drew nearer, paused. Some one was bending over her. "Marais." Dan's voice all breathless and hasty.

She couldn't answer.

"What's the matter, Marais? I've been looking all over the place for you."

Oh, it was good to hear somebody speak in that roughly tender way. Her heart fluttered, but still she couldn't utter a word.

"Marais." He was on his knees beside her now—had her hands, had raised her and was looking anxiously at her tear-stained face.

Then as he pushed back the hair gently from her forehead, sparkles and flames leaped all over her like lightning. The heavy stone in her breast turned into a warm, singing feeling. She looked into his black eyes where apprehension struggled with that other expression which thrilled her with its strength and its tenderness. It seemed the most natural thing

in the world when he put his arms about her and she leaned her cheek against his dear, fuzzy coat. The way people did when they gave themselves to one another. After a while she told him, between broken pauses, what had happened in the Lost Garden.

"They'll make it up." He held her closer. "Just you see."

Oh, but he was wonderful, knowing what she wanted to say before she had gotten it out of her mouth. Dan, Dan! They stayed there a long time. At last when the grinding of Muggy's hack wheels on the stone driveway announced the departure of the guests, Marais drew herself reluctantly from his arms and rose. They stood together a moment in the shadow of the laurestinus bush.

"Good night," he whispered, "good night, darling." His lips covered hers in the kiss in whose shock of bliss she sealed her silent promise to him. "I'll see you to-morrow."

See her to-morrow! Of course he'd see her to-morrow, and all the other to-morrows to follow. Marais sang a wonderful song of the heart through her dreams. And when she woke it was the day Uncle Webb and Miss Dot were to make up their quarrel and she was to see Dan.

Saturday. "Time to get up, Marais. Cleaning day," called Mrs. Plover from the foot of the stairs.

Marais sat bolt upright in bed, pushing the hair out of her eyes. "All right." A fine chance to use up some of the energy that made her want to tear all over the place. Just watch her get after that sitting room. A relief from the vision which dazzled her eyes.

Out into a morning of sunlight and dew and incensed odor of flowers she stepped. "Pee-yough, but these rugs smell dusty!" To throw them over the clothesline and find the old piece of hose to beat them with were trifles to one whose head was near the morning stars. As she poked around for the hose in the woodshed where once she had crouched alone, watching the April Fool picnickers pass by her knothole, her joyful pity for that solitary child welled up. "I'll never be alone again. It'll always be Dan and me. Just Dan and me." Did people sometimes die of their happiness?

How the dust flew! She made a picture under the elderberry tree, beating the rugs till it fogged thick about her, the color flooded her cheeks, and her hair was loosened about her face.

It was thus that Dan found her, the carpet beater poised on high, every line of her strong, young body alive with arrested motion. He walked straight up to her. "Marais," his face was pale, "I've come to say good-by."

Her arms dropped. "Good-by," she echoed.

He nodded, his face much graver than she had ever seen it before, but illuminated by an astonished, struggling joy. "Yes, I'm going away—to Idaho. I got that big engineer friend of Mr. Wentworth's to have a talk with father. He won him over—good, old dad."

"When—are—you—going?" Marais had to moisten her lips. Even then her voice was toneless like that of a deaf person.

He came a step nearer. "To-day. It was decided only this morning."

"But why—why so soon?" faltered Marais.

"I'm afraid if I wait dad'll change his mind. There's an opening in the mines near Lewiston. Too great a chance to lose. Just think—a year in that country shoulder to shoulder with men. Oh, Marais!" Dan threw the hair out of his eyes.

Not a word about college, about missing the next year they were to have had there together. Not a word about last night. Oh, how could he forget?

"I'm going to miss you horribly, Marais." His voice pleaded low. "But I'll write you all about everything, and it won't be long. You do see what it means to me, don't you?"

She tried to answer. But iron fingers at her throat held her dumb and her head felt as though it would crack with the suddenness of the blow.

Dan peered at her in hurt wonder. He touched her hand. It was cold and lifeless. Then he drew a deep breath. "Come into the house and tell me good-by, won't you, Marais?"

Still she was silent. Her brain kept going round and round, showing her on an endless screen and the images of herself and Dan beneath the laurestinus bush, of Dan on his way to Idaho, of herself alone in the garden. What was it her mother had dinned into her ears from the time she was a baby? "Never let boys lay the weight of their hands on you." And she had thought when Dan's arms had gone around her that was as sacred as being married. She stared at him in ashen immobility, a deathly sickness creeping over her.

Dan still looked incredulous. "Good-by, Marais," he muttered, and touched her hand again as if to reassure himself that the girl who stood there was

really Marais. "Good-by," he repeated as one who speaks a formula. Then he strode out of the garden.

"Hurry, Marais! I'm ready for the rugs," rang Mrs. Plover's voice on the morning air.

PART TWO
GLAMOUR (JULY—NOVEMBER, 1909)

CHAPTER I

THE GLORIOUS FOURTH

Six years from the summer of John Wentworth's Hawaiian fête Marais stood with her mother in the hot sunshine on crowded Central Avenue, her eyes turned in the direction from which the Fourth of July procession was supposed to appear.

"Here they come," Mrs. Plover's back snapped out of its rigidity as a burst of brassy music split the bright, still air, and around the Central House corner swung the Oakleyville Band headed by Muggy Abshire, the only citizen who could twirl a baton and march backward. "I do declare, he hasn't changed one bit in twenty years."

Marais, watching the weazened major-domo in his red, white, and blue uniform opened her lips, then closed them so tightly that the nicked corners disappeared in their firm line. Better to remain silent whenever her mother uttered an opinion—really a dictum. In this way the open clashing of wills had become just an unpleasant memory. But what would Mrs. Plover say if she knew that during the past six years—four of which Marais had spent going to college by means of a scholarship and money borrowed from John Wentworth, and two in teaching English in the Oakleyville high school, successor to Parnassus College,—Muggy Abshire, Central Avenue, indeed all Oakleyville had shrunk for her in size and significance. Marais never mentioned that

the cupola on the Central House which used to pierce the heavens was curiously smaller, the crystal globes in "Doc" Farley's window had lost their burnished glory, or that Hay Spinkham's display of cut glass and fresh vegetables seemed less impressive than when she accompanied her mother downtown on the first day of the month to pay bills. Even the flag-trimmed floats now passing before her eyes and the buxom Goddess of Liberty complacent on her starry throne didn't thrill her as when she wore her blue-clocked stockings to match her robin's egg sash, and Uncle Webb treated her to pink ice cream at "Doc" Farley's soda fountain after the parade. No, there were only two factors in Oakleyville to hold her interest: her work in the high school—and one other.

As the open carriage occupied by Judge Alonzo Sharsbury, orator of the day, rolled slowly past, Marais cast a swift glance at Mrs. Plover. Was she recalling the Fourth of July of three years ago when Uncle Webb had filled that honored position? The difficulty they'd had even then in keeping him at home long enough to prepare his speech? Their shared fear that he would be unfit to speak when the critical moment came? As it turned out he had made a success almost like those of his old, political days. Only their eyes, sharpened by anxiety, could detect the unsteadiness of his hand as he lifted the inevitable glass of water to his lips. Only any one intimately acquainted with the former classic pallor of his face would have questioned his ruddiness and the gathering fullness beneath his eyes.

No danger of such an invitation being repeated now. Not with that shuddering array of evasions, of sleepless night, and drunken home-comings piling

up such a formidable and public score in the past three years. No, Uncle Webb, the golden eagle of Marais's youth, had gone quite beyond her mother's sharp watchfulness, no longer came home in answer to Grandmother Haliburton's childish whimpering prayers. He'd gone so far that she wondered just how much longer he could hold even the minor position Mr. Wentworth had given him in the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank, and glanced nervously up and down the street for fear she'd see him, stopping here and there among the crowd in an attempt at his old-time gayety, his collar sprayed with dandruff, his shoes unpolished, in his eyes the look of one sensitive to every sneer and lifted shoulder. So miserably clear were the girl's impressions that she looked involuntarily at her mother to see if she, too, was in the grip of Uncle Webb's past and present.

But Marais could discern nothing from Mrs. Plover's undaunted face, little changed except for the gray on her temples and the deeper tracing of lines about her mouth. But suddenly the girl knew by the coldness of her light eye that she was stark with disapproval. Simultaneously a voice sent the intractable blood into her own cheek.

"Out to show your patriotism, Mrs. Plover?" Preston Marbury in white flannels and dark blue coat above which his face shone ivory pale, smiled at Marais's mother, at the same time conveying to Marais by a covert gleam of his black eye his pleasure in seeing her.

Undisturbed by Mrs. Plover's frigid bow, he took his place between the two, giving Marais's fingers a light pressure which because of the deliciousness of

its secrecy as well as its caress, dashed the girl's cheeks again with crimson.

"If you ladies are going to the exercises, may I walk along?"

Marais glanced swiftly at the two profiles; Preston's handsome, carven, her mother's eagle and forbidding. Too much of a strain to sit between them on the hard, courtyard benches while Judge Sharsbury droned through the noon heat.

Mrs. Plover evidently felt the same way. "Don't let us trouble you, Mr. Marbury. My niece Mrs. Jewett will join us as soon as she's taken Rosalie home from the parade. She is too young to get much out of the exercises."

At her mother's words Marais's eyes sparkled rebelliously. If mother was going to dismiss Preston in that summary way, she'd show her that she couldn't be disposed of so easily. "So am I," she laughed, her nostrils fanning with her quick breath. "One has to draw the line somewhere, and mine is at Fourth of July exercises. I always have to stand up, and my shoes pinch and I want to drink pink lemonade, and there isn't any and hasn't been since I was a small girl. Which never ceases to be a blow. I'm like Rosalie. I'm going home."

Preston met her challenging glance. "Since your mother spurns my company, I'm coming with you. Please don't say no."

Marais made up for Mrs. Plover's uncompromising silence by a gay, little crinkling of lines about her eyes in which golden sparks had begun to dance, and a careless, "I'll say nothing."

After Cousin Jaquith, all the former lovely color in her thin cheeks faded to a sallowish-white, had

hurried up apologetically, her five-year-old Guinevere, a replica of Abner's dogged redness, hanging to her dress, and the three had followed the last float of school children screaming "Yankee Doodle," Preston stood a moment looking at Mrs. Plover's straight back.

"Your mother's a wonderful woman. Monarch of the forest and all that sort of thing for courage. But she's got no use for me. I wonder why."

Marais said nothing. She couldn't tell Preston that the first time her mother had met him six months before when he had come to Oakleyville to practice law, she had remarked, "Look out for those thick, black eyes. They're not to be trusted," and that her dislike had grown in proportion to Marais's interest in him. She recognized his sultry, electric fascination as they sauntered down College Street and he turned toward her, his gaze deepening as he took in every detail of her tall slimness in its blue linen and the pale triangle of her face beneath her wide, black hat brim which cast her gray eyes into a cool shadow and revealed just a gleam of bright hair low on her forehead. Only the vividness of her mouth remained unprotected. When Preston's eyes, having dwelt on her grave face, dropped for a moment to her crimson lips, she broke the silence abruptly.

"You should have gone to the exercises."

"Why?" He was still looking at her.

"Because it's policy for a young lawyer to show himself conspicuously on public occasions."

"My diplomacy is never based on methods as banal as that," he laughed.

"What is your method? Or is it too deep to be divulged?"

"Not at all," he shrugged lightly. "It's very simple. Merely to find out people's weaknesses and then play upon them."

"You mean in business?"

"In everything. People like to have the other fellow do their thinking for them. Only they must be deluded into believing they are managing the game themselves."

"Rather a heartless proposition, isn't it?"

He shook his close-cropped, black head. "Never wise to let your heart have the upper hand in business, or in love either."

"Ah, the continental method," she murmured.

"Exactly. Of course in the matter of marriage, so much the better if there's affection thrown in."

Marais kept her eyes straight ahead of her.

"What do you think about it?" he asked after a little.

"Marriage?"

"Yes."

"Not much of anything." She spoke shortly in her effort to blot out her sudden vision of the gnarled limb of an old cottonwood above the stippled water, Dan's boyish eyes shadowed by a blob of black hair, his scornful voice, "But of course you'll get married, like all girls," and her quick reply, "I'm never going to get married . . . I'm going to write books." She shut the door hard upon that picture. "But I'm sure there has to be a lot of pretty fine comradeship to make it go."

Preston's nonchalance faded in the serious gaze he turned upon her. "For the first time in my life

I'm learning to know what that word means—Marais."

She made no reply and refused to lift her eyes to his in which she knew burned a steady fire.

"Our talks—our drives—there's never been anything like them. You know it as well as I do." He came so close that his sleeve brushed her arm. "You do enjoy them too, don't you, Marais?"

For a moment everything swam beneath the spell of his presence. Then she flung up her head with an audacious laugh. "What was it you said the other day? 'Never make a direct answer when you can side-step it?'"

Preston lifted his shoulders as if to disclaim responsibility for any past utterance. "Why bait me with what I said yesterday? You're like my sister Alicia, trying to pin me down to consistency. It can't be done to a great mind. By the way," he turned toward her abruptly, "don't forget you're coming with me to the ranch when my people get back from Carmel."

In Marais's eyes the sparks still danced perversely. Sometimes Preston's loftiness regarding his family gave her a sense of depression. To-day, however, her spirits leaped over any hurdle of inferiority his attitude might erect.

"If you set a definite date perhaps I'll consider it," she remarked casually. "Your invitations have been rather vague, you know."

Preston struck fire from her. "We'll make it the first week-end in September."

"Sydney Dalrymple may be visiting me then. She's coming from New York the last of August."

"Bring her along. Of course I'd rather take you alone the first time. You know that——"

Marais turned to bow to an old man who at that moment shambled by. A fierce, wrinkled face peered from beneath a wide-brimmed, gray felt hat with a stovepipe crown. The boots in which his shabby trousers were tucked had oddly tapering high heels. His glance of suspicion softened into pleased recognition when it rested upon Preston's countenance.

"Strange old bird," he chuckled after the uncouth figure was out of earshot.

"I didn't know you and Jim Hasler were friends. Will he talk to you?" Marais regarded him in surprise.

The young man laughed coolly. "Better than that. He invited me down to his house. Rather an attractive place, with that quaint gallery and the old oak in front. Showed me his old firearms and told me all about his experiences during the Civil War. Jove, he must have been a fire eater!"

"Yes, mother says he always used to carry a knife in his boot, and he was imprisoned on Alcatraz Island for threatening the government. But he never talks to any one now." A frown wrinkled her wide forehead. "Perhaps he isn't proof against your diplomacy. What did you find to be his weakness?"

Preston remained unmoved. "Vanity. He's as proud as a fighting cock of his record as the fiercest man in northern California. I hung on his stories, and made him tell them to me over and over again. So now I'm solid."

"What is your ulterior motive?"

"None, this time. I'm just interested in his pic-

turesque past. And something about him touched me. Telling yarns about days gone by seemed to cheer the old chap up a lot."

As Marais met his imperturbable smile she was ashamed of her suspicions.

In the house she was surprised to find that her mother had already preceded her.

"Guinevere got a peanut in her throat, and bawled so loud Jaquith had to take her home," was Mrs. Plover's succinct explanation as she blew each moist white glove into the semblance of a billowy hand.

She remained standing in the middle of the long, shabby living-room, her eyes fixed sternly upon the steel engraving of "The Marriage of Pocahontas" over the mantelpiece. Marais knew from the expression of her mouth that she was preparing to say something.

"Marais," she said finally, "I know you resent any interference of what you call your freedom, and since you're earning your own living I can't treat you as if you were a child. But I'd like to ask you one question. Why do you let Preston Marbury pay you attention?"

The smile which broke the gravity of Marais's mouth at her mother's picture of Guinevere faded, leaving the lower part of her face curiously like that of Mrs. Plover. "Isn't that rather a bald question?"

"Not from a mother to a daughter, according to the way I was brought up."

Marais looked at her, the pupils of her eyes expanding with the gathering energy of her thoughts. "You'd never understand in a thousand years if I tried to explain why I think you've got no right to

interfere with me.” The unspoken words hurtled across the space between them with such force that it seemed to the girl they must strike her mother’s square forehead and rebound to her. But Mrs. Plover continued standing there in unflinching calm. “You kept me down when I was a child, never answered my questions, made me feel that kissing games led people into having babies without being married, or becoming like Salome Buford. When Dan went away, if I’d been brought up less strictly, I wouldn’t have felt I was jilted, but would have understood that his enthusiasm for his new work meant no slight to our love. I’d have answered his letters instead of saying to myself every time I tore one up, ‘There, I guess after a while he’ll know I don’t care a rap,’ when all the time I was suffering the tortures of the damned. Well, all that’s over. I’m free. And I’m going to stay so. If there’s any hurting done now, it’ll be my responsibility. As for Preston Marbury, I can’t let your unreasonable prejudice spoil our friendship.” It wasn’t quite so easy to formulate into words even to herself the reason for his attraction for her. In spite of an occasional flicker of uneasiness at the peculiarity of some of his standards she liked to be with him, recalled with pleasure his bared head as he had stood at the gate, saying in his persuasive tones, “I’ve got to drive out to Cy Miller’s on business Saturday. Come along, won’t you?” thrilled at the gleam of admiration and something challenging in his eye when he said good-by, was already looking forward to being with him on Saturday.

But how useless to try to convey any of this to Mrs. Plover who stood in judicial repose waiting for

an answer. When none came she spoke, weighing each word with careful consideration. "Well, all I've got to say is that he'll bear watching."

The eyes of mother and daughter met and between the two flashed a hard spark of antagonism.

"I'm sorry you don't like him," observed Marais coldly. "I count him as one of my best friends and expect to see a lot of him this winter."



CHAPTER II

THE SQUIRREL CAGE

INSTEAD of going driving with Preston on Saturday afternoon, Marais sat in the back yard, correcting sophomore English papers while she dried her amber seaweed hair in the July sun. When her mother had announced that Saturday was the last meeting of her bridge club—the churchly prejudice against that form of amusement having been removed—Marais realized it was her turn to stay at home with Grandmother Haliburton. The old lady had lived with the Plovers ever since a Sunday two years before when she had awakened bewildered from her nap and begged with wild horror-fixed eyes to be taken “over the hill where my son’ll be waiting for me.” Dr. Simmons’s pronouncement that the trouble was due to a broken blood vessel in the brain had fallen like dried seeds on Marais’s ears. Too well she knew what had precipitated the calamity.

So she changed her appointment with Preston to the evening, and, watching to see that her grandmother didn’t run away, seated herself in the lacy-shadowed out-of-doors to work. But the ink hung in a ruby drop on her fountain pen as her eyes rested upon the furry green of the elderberry tree beneath which the hydrant still dripped into its wooden tub. How many centuries was it since she had stood

there, the carpet beater fallen from her hand while Dan had stared dumbly into her white face? She kept the door of that period shut and locked securely, but memories would seep through her solid determination to thrust them away in a dark corner, memories of that enchanted day at Fowler's, walks home from Parnassus College, practices of "The Merchant of Venice," the moment beneath the laurestinus bush in the Wentworth garden. No telling how she might have danced, acted, created her way through her four college years if she and Dan could have only had them together. As it was she had plodded ahead on a sober level, making an excellent record of scholarship, going out with the youths attracted by her vivid aloofness, preparing to teach English in the Oakleyville high school—a position John Wentworth, Hay Spinkham, and Jerg Robbins, all members of the school board, assured Mrs. Plover Marais could have as soon as she was ready. "Do you think we forget what her grandfather did for Oakleyville?" they said handsomely—above all, training herself to think and act with independence.

It was only when something recalled the past sharply, that the inner voices forced her to listen to them.

"You know Dan showed excellent judgment in taking such an opportunity. Hasn't his success as an engineer proved that?"

"Yes, but he left me."

"If you'd had patience he would have come back to you, the better for his experience. Think what it's meant to him to have spent these six years in South America, England, and Russia."

"If only he hadn't left me without a word just after we were practically engaged?"

"But were you engaged? Had he said one word to make you think he had given himself to you as you had to him?"

"What do words count at such a time?"

"Everything. Your mother is right. People must be practical, especially in romance."

Marais shook her drying hair into a burnished cloud. "Don't worry. I've learned my lesson. Nothing like that is ever going to happen to me again. I'm living my own life these days——"

At an exploding firecracker of sound she looked up. Theodore in a blue jumper with a kitchen apron tied about his stocky middle, had deposited a wash basket beneath the clothesline and was shaking out a dripping sheet.

"Theodore, where's grandmother?" Marais spoke with mechanical swiftness.

His face twisted into a network of wrinkles and he disappeared around the house while Marais waited in sudden suspense.

In a moment he returned, warm relief ironing the pucker from the corners of his eyes. "There she comes now." He nodded toward the back lot opening off the garden. Theodore was certainly a treasure in spite of the fact that he got drunk about twice a year and came home long after midnight, rousing the whole block with his singing, "Sittin' on the edge of the world, come one, come all."

Sure enough, around the corner of the woodshed hurried Grandmother Haliburton. The shrunken figure in its gray wrapper was bent, the faded eyes had the furtive, worried look of one continually

thwarted in her heart's desire, and across the brown, wrinkled forehead straggled the hair once carefully parted. But it was still raven black, sign of the stern vigor which had marked her former years.

"Grandmother," Marais raised her finger, "have you been eating nuts again?"

The old woman hastily brushed her slack, telltale mouth. "No, I—I—" she began.

As Marais unwrapped the apron from the twitching fingers, four black walnuts thudded to the ground.

Grandmother Haliburton began to whimper. "I'm—I'm hungry. It's come to a pretty pass if a body can't have a bite to eat."

Marais sighed. "But you had lunch not an hour ago."

The old lady set her mouth stubbornly. "I haven't tasted a mouthful since I don't know when. I'm an old woman and I need nourishing food." Tears began to course down furrows which seemed channeled for them. "I'll go to my son. He'll see that I get something to eat. He won't treat me this way." Still whimpering, she turned away and scuttled toward the house.

"Grandma's awful restless to-day," remarked Theodore, pinning Young John's overalls to the line. "She had her feather bed on the floor this morning and said she was goin' to break up housekeeping. I bet she's run in an' out fifty times. She's found something at the barn she's tryin' to smuggle into her room. You can't fool me."

"Well, it keeps her amused." Marais absently marked the mis-spelled word "separate" heavily with red ink.

"Where's my hammer?" The bellow which catapulted from the direction of the barn was followed by the thud-thud of running feet, and Young John dashed around the corner of the woodshed. When his red-brown eyes, hot with impatience, saw Marais and Theodore, he stopped, breathing hard. "Did either of you take it?" he challenged them.

Marais shook her head, smiling into his stormy face almost on a level with hers.

"How can I finish my worktable?" The little quaver in his rough, boyish voice touched his sister.

Suddenly a light broke in upon her. "Perhaps Grandmother——"

He leaped to her suggestion like a young hound unleashed. "Sure. I bet she's got it in her room to crack nuts with." He was off in a flash. The wire door banged once, twice; then he was back waving the lost treasure triumphantly.

"What was she doing?" asked Marais as he bounded by.

"She wasn't there," he flung back.

"Not there," echoed his sister blankly. "Theodore, did you hear that?" She started up, her hair whipping in her eyes, papers fluttering in all directions.

The next moment she was in the house, in the old woman's room, searching behind doors, in the closets. No response to her repeated calls. She flew upstairs, only to be met by the same staring emptiness. Grandmother was gone.

In the living-room she faced Theodore following mutely in her frantic search. "You go by the alley," she commanded briefly as she twisted up the

long hair from her blanched face. "I'll take the front way."

She hurried along College Street, her gaze worrying out every possible hiding place. Well, there was no doubt about it. Grandmother had finally gained her own way. For months, the intention to run away had simmered in her cunning old brain. Single-handed she had fought a silent battle to escape Marais, Mrs. Plover, and Theodore, and now she had won her point.

The girl paused, her eyes following the clear sweep for five blocks to Central Avenue. Grandmother Haliburton had taken that way to church for so long she might do it now from habit. She hoped she hadn't decided to change her dress right in the middle of the street. She'd been known to try it. But there wasn't a glimpse of the bent figure the length of the blocks. And nobody in sight who had seen the old lady. In looking for Uncle Webb her blind search was taking her anywhere. That meant a street-to-street hunt. Marais was running now past the houses of friends—no time to let people know—past Mrs. Sharsbury's where her mother was playing cards. What would she say to their letting Grandmother Haliburton slip away? "I never heard of such a thing in my life! Two great, grown people. What if she's been run over and killed?" She ran on and on, goaded by that fear and the realization that it would soon be dark. And grandmother so hungry she'd tell anybody she met that she was starving to death.

Suddenly a cry halted her. She clung breathless to the pickets of a fence. A woman on the porch of

the little, stone house inside the fence hurried down the flagged walk.

"Don't be frightened," she said. "Your grandmother's all right. I was just going to let you know."

Marais looked at her, bewildered. It took several seconds before she realized that she was face to face with Salome Buford.

"Is she in there?" Her voice expanded in unbelievable relief.

Salome nodded, her eyes glistening. "I found her wandering about in the alley back of my house. She——"

But Marais was already halfway up the walk, unconscious that Salome was endeavoring to tell her something. The small room into which she hurried was at first dark to her unaccustomed eyes. On her ears fell the sound as of a dog munching bones.

"She said she was hungry." Salome in the doorway spoke apologetically.

The jealous gloom yielded the various objects of the room to Marais's gaze. Heavy curtains hung at the windows. The fading light caught the gilt frames of several pictures and played on the polished surface of a grand piano. Grandmother Haliburton sat before a table tearing ravenously at a piece of bread thick with honey.

"Oh, grandmother, how could you run away?" Tears in her throat strangled Marais's breath.

The old woman shrank back. "I didn't run away," she protested. "I came to find my son. And the woman was good to me. I was hungry. I told her so. You know I hadn't had anything to eat——"

Marais was suddenly aware that there was an-

other person in the room. Without turning her head, she knew that in the far corner sat a motionless figure.

"Hello, Uncle Webb." She strove to keep the tremor out of her voice.

"Hello, Marais." Webb Haliburton came forward so that the light fell upon his bitter, sodden eyes beneath the tumble of hair seamed with gray. "Ma decided to take a little walk, didn't she?" he chuckled conversationally.

Marais wondered how he could laugh at anything so pathetic—he of all people. Then her eye caught sight of his hands. He began to pace the floor with uneven steps. Her somber eyes watched the three people there in the dusk-filled room, her uncle with hands so tremulous that the employees at the bank must have hard work to read his handwriting, Grandmother Haliburton sunk into a sudden lethargy, and Salome Buford, silent and brooding. She felt engulfed in the atmosphere of dark futility, longed vehemently to be out driving with Preston, the wind beating upon her cheeks flushed by her proximity to him, his eyes glancing at her in that tantalizing invitation. She rose and spoke to Salome Buford.

"I must take her home before it gets any later."

"Yes." The other also rose. "I'll fetch a wrap for her."

She started from the room. Just outside the door she beckoned to Marais who followed her into the bedroom, oddly incongruous with Salome's plain dress and square shoes. Delicate water colors hung on the discolored walls and the old-fashioned bureau was loaded with silver toilet articles. Salome closed

the door carefully and the two women faced one another.

Salome spoke brusquely. "I've tried to get him not to come here."

Marais, who did not know how to reply to this frankness, noted how the woman had changed since the day she had staggered to her knees in Hay Spinkham's store. She was thinner and from her face shaped by lines more compact and resolute her eyes looked out with clear steadiness.

"His pride won't let him go anywhere else. It's either here or downtown," she said simply. "This is better than the saloons."

Suddenly Marais choked. Impulsively she touched Salome's hand. "You—you are good——"

The older woman drew back quickly. "I'm not doing anything. He lost out partly through me. My brother wasn't quite behaving himself and I went to Webb——"

"I know," said Marais. "At the Wentworth party. That wasn't your fault. It would have happened anyway."

Salome looked thoughtful. "Perhaps. I did everything I could. I—went to—the girl."

"Oh," breathed Marais. She could picture that meeting of the two, Dot Farley—logically enough, now Mrs. Dwight Brockett—exquisite, remote, utterly uncomprehending, her pride cut, staring disdainfully at Salome, clumsy, submissive, in the attitude of one who pleads, yet with the compelling truth to tell.

"She loved him as much as she could love any one," said Salome. "Afterward she tried to see him."

"Of course it did no good. I knew that night she had killed the thing she created. She never understood." Marais threw back her head.

"It's his pride—his terrific pride." Salome's voice was so changed in its low vehemence that the girl scarcely recognized it. "If he'd only turn it to some better purpose. Had you ever thought—" she paused.

"What?" asked Marais sharply.

"The bank. He's gambling again. Something must be done." Her face became maternally fierce. "Something's got to be done."

She went swiftly into the closet and rummaged there a moment. When she returned with an old black garment, her face had resumed its calm. "Will that do?" she held up the coat.

Marais nodded.

In the front room the old woman dozed over her empty plate. Webb Haliburton had returned to his shadowy seat.

"Come, grandmother." Marais touched the old lady gently on the shoulder. "We must be going."

"I tell you I didn't run away," whimpered Grandmother Haliburton, starting from her nap. "I came to see my son. You won't tell on me, will you?" She clutched Marais's arm.

Marais turned casually. "Coming along, Uncle Webb?"

He cleared his throat. "Not just now. I'll drop in later."

The girl accepted this fiction in silence.

When the two approached Mrs. Plover's gate and the old woman beheld her daughter's figure upright

in the living-room window, she hung back. "You won't tell that woman I ran away," she whispered.

"No, I won't tell, grandmother," Marais whispered back. She knew only too well the old woman's shrinking from her mother's stern eye. She herself quailed at the thought of the rebuke which awaited her but which she would meet without apparent flinching.

As her grandmother, assured of safety, scuttled into the house, she paused on the steps, pushing the hair from her tired forehead. Prison—they were all in prison. Grandmother's thoughts scurried about hopelessly like rats in a trap. They got her nowhere. Uncle Webb had dug his own dungeon by his recklessness and lack of moral fiber. Her mother was cramped by her respect for Oakleyville standards and her own rigid code of duty. Was she going to let herself be bound to them until life became for her also a round upon round of squirrel-cage futility?

At that moment a horse and buggy stopped at Mrs. Plover's hitching post and a slight figure in white ducks sprang to the sidewalk—Preston come for their drive. With a leap of her heart Marais had fled into the house, was upstairs in her room before her mother could call to her, was combing her hair with flying fingers, slipping into a clean dress.

"No, no," she whispered to the shining eyes in the mirror, "I may have to stay here and teach school, but I'm going to live my own life."

CHAPTER III

THE OLD HOUSE IN THE HILLS

“WELL, now that you’ve finally come to Marbury Heights, what do you think of it all?” Preston Marbury, seated beside Marais upon a dilapidated, rustic bench, swept the scene with a comprehensive arm.

The girl rose and walked to the edge of the high plateau upon which they were stationed. She stood there in her rough green sweater and plaid skirt against the pale September sky. Below her lay the tiny roads, the farmhouses among their trees, the flat, straw-colored spaces of grazing land, the mistiness of Oakleyville twelve miles away, and in the far distance the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevadas. In silence she turned to the dark, old house back of her, clearly defined against the bare, yellow Coast Range foothills. Over the quaint, gabled roof and wide, pillared porch several oaks flung their branches. At one side three eucalyptus trees shone silver-white in the afternoon light. The walls were weathered almost black, contrasting sharply with the fallow carpet of dried foxtails and oats which overran the remnant of a garden.

“What a strange old place!” Marais lifted her eyes to Preston’s and was all at once restlessly conscious of herself and him. “It looks as if it might have a story.”

He came and stood beside her on the overgrown path. "There is some sort of a yarn about the people who had the place before my father bought it. Alicia likes to think it's a tradition." He shrugged off the unimportant topic. "But who cares for ghost stories when you're here at last, Marais?" He caressed the last word slowly.

At the contact of his rough tweed sleeve against her arm an electric current swept her from head to foot. As the sound of voices floated to them from the garden he spoke more quickly. "Even if you couldn't come alone, you're here. I wonder if you know how happy that makes me, Marais."

In that hurried moment Preston crowded the secrecy of devotion, impatience at interruption, the quick adjustment of his features to an expression of host's courtesy to meet the two women who rounded the corner of the house—his sister Alicia, a slight person of thirty-five in a black gown with austere white at neck and throat, and Sydney Dalrymple, a blue army cape lined with crimson flung across her shoulders, her cropped, curling hair giving her, with the lift of her short, upper lip and the haughty glance of her brown eye, the air of an imperious princeling.

"It's almost sunset, Preston. Miss Dalrymple says she'd like to take the hill walk."

Although Marais never saw Alicia Marbury but this once, from her very first speech the girl gained the distinct impression of her dominant power. Almost without knowing how she found herself in the rear with Preston's sister while he and Sydney sauntered ahead. Miss Marbury seemed to lag behind on purpose as she chatted of the improvements she

hoped one day they could make in the old place. And certainly her ironical features gleamed with pale satisfaction when they turned up the neighboring slope whither Sydney and Preston had disappeared, and beheld the two radiant in the last gold of the sun.

At Miss Marbury's remark, "We consider this our most stunning view," Marais's eyes rested upon the purple wall of the mountain all but hiding the molten sun flooding the chaparral, the manzanita, and buck-eye in the canyon, and setting fire to its pongee-colored slopes. But she saw only Sydney leaning against a pine tree, the blue of her cape forming a pillowed background for her bright head, and Preston lying at her feet, gazing into her intent face.

After dinner, they crossed the square hall with its bear rug, fishing rods and guns stacked in the corner, and seated themselves in the long living-room, dim even in the firelight and the flare of many candles in silver sconces. Alicia wheeled her mother's chair before the great fireplace so that the flames illuminated her tremulous, old face beneath the snowy, puffed hair. Looking at her as she dreamed in the warmth, Marais thought of her grandmother as she found her sometimes at night, her hair wild about her bewildered face, the room in huddled confusion. Sydney and Preston, on the wide-winged sofa, carried on a low-toned conversation. In her amber gown Sydney bore herself with a lithe, sophisticated freedom which only an independent dweller of many cities can achieve.

The candle and firelight made shadow play on the faces of the group and illumined the farthest corners of the spacious room, only to sink them again into mysterious blackness. It revealed the simplic-

ity which gave the apartment its air of distinction, the few dark rugs scattered over the floor, the prints on the wall space. At the far end of the room where gleamed the glass of a conservatory, some sheets of music lay scattered on an old, square piano. A reasonable room furnished with objects one might see in any home. Yet in spite of that fact, in spite of the pine-cone fire, and Sydney's gay laugh, its atmosphere struck a chill to Marais's heart.

A silence had fallen upon the circle as though it shared her mood.

"Preston, how about telling your friends the story of this house?" Miss Marbury's dry voice broke the stillness.

"Oh, Alicia, don't!" Her brother twisted the black ribbon which held his gold pencil and laughed impatiently.

Sydney sat up, the firelight catching the gold of her rumpled curls. "Of course. I knew this place had a history. Please go ahead."

"Go on, Preston." Miss Marbury didn't raise her eyes from the tatting which employed her flying fingers, but Marais felt she lost no detail of Sydney's eagerness and her brother's yielding resistance.

She failed to hear the beginning of the story in wondering idly if Miss Marbury's plan for restoring Marbury Heights had anything to do with her brother. Perhaps he had learned his practical ideas of matrimony from her. Certainly he seemed to have no illusions on the subject. Suppose it were in his mind that he and Sydney— But no, not after his welcome of her that afternoon, the pressure of his hand, the warmth of his black eyes upon her. Each was in itself a declaration. In relief at her

conclusion she surrendered herself to the spell of his voice, was carried along with the others on the tide of the story he was telling with graphic touches as he stood in front of the fire.

She saw the huge, shock-headed old man McArthur and his lovely, young wife, whom he had bought for ten thousand dollars from her French Canadian father, seated before this very fireplace night after night; saw her when McArthur was away looking after his ranches, alone except for a half-breed chore boy and the old Chinese cook who had prepared her husband's meals for the past twenty years; saw her drive occasionally to the village of Winters where she talked over her buggy wheel with the handsome, young bank cashier; saw him, helped by the chore boy who worshipped his mistress, come to this unfrequented spot when McArthur was away. She heard the wind and rain which washed out the levees of the Sacramento and were the cause of the old man's drive in a blinding storm to one of his river ranches. She saw him as he stood in the gusty doorway buttoning his great figure into his oilskins, venting his irritation on his wife by ordering her not to speak to any one in his absence, and found herself regretting that he didn't show better sense than thundering such commands to a lonely, homesick girl.

"He had hardly banged his way out," said Preston, "when she told the chore boy to hitch up and go for the cashier. It was dark by the time the young man came dripping into this very room where McArthur's wife was waiting for him. She began to cry, and he took her in his arms, kissing her, curs-

ing McArthur, and finally begging her to go away with him."

When Preston paused the silence in the room was as dense as darkness.

"At that moment as a flight of sparks from a broken ember showed them locked in one another's arms, from somewhere near the piano came a low chuckle. They stood like graven images, afraid to stir an inch. Above them on the wall they saw a huge shadow coming nearer and nearer, followed by another one. Even as they waited, clinging to one another in their terror, there was a flash of steel, a scuffle, a pistol shot, and the sound of a heavy body thudding to the floor. The lovers stared at each other, scarcely believing they were safe. Then without looking in the direction of the heap of blackness on the floor or the figure creeping out by the conservatory, they fled into the storm, and the room was left with its secret and the wind shrieking like a live thing around the corners of the house."

It was Sydney who broke the stillness. "Well, what was the rest?"

Preston laughed as he lighted a cigarette. "I always stop at that point. Alicia can tell you the epilogue."

His sister glanced at her sleeping mother and spoke in carefully lowered tones. "I don't know why Preston always stops at the most interesting part. The two went down to Winters where the girl stayed at the hotel the rest of the night. The next morning the chore boy was found wandering by the roadside. In his hand was a pistol and his shirt was all covered with blood—the old man's blood, it was discovered. In the living-room of McArthur's

house they found his dead body. At the coroner's inquest it came out that the boy had overheard the Chinaman telling his master about the cashier's visits. He was afraid the old man would harm his mistress and armed himself for such an emergency."

At this point Mrs. Marbury stirred and murmured in her chair, and everybody rose instinctively to say good night. In the hallway Preston opened the front door a moment on a silver world embossed in ebony.

"Oh, lovely!" exclaimed Marais.

When he closed the door and presented the girls with candles at the foot of the stairs, Preston bowed low over Sydney's hand, but he caught Marais's eyes as she moved slowly up the spindle steps with a question in his lingering glance.

Sydney was silent as the two girls undressed. Marais, absorbed in her own thoughts, didn't notice it until she spoke abruptly. "What an idiotic mess most people make of marriage—like old McArthur and the French girl." Her slipper fell smartly to the floor.

"Admitted," laughed Marais absently from the foot of the bed, "but—what's the answer?"

Sydney slid her arms into the loose sleeves of a gorgeous Chinese dressing gown. "Take away marriage except for the herd."

"That would be quite a step, now, wouldn't it?" Marais, engaged in brushing out her hair, watched it fall in shining lines across the lamp.

"I'm not joking." Sydney faced her friend sharply, her bright head and splendid back wavering in the mirror's dim surface. "I mean every word I say."

"How long do you think a union like that would last?"

"As long as love lasts."

"What if there were children?"

Sydney made a furious effort at patience. "Why should parents or children either care a rap for a society whose standards are so smug they choke you? People who set up their own marriage covenants aren't doing so to reform the world. They're registering their right to freedom." She threw back her head with the familiar gesture of defiance.

Marais rose and finished braiding her hair while Sydney got into bed. Then she paused by the lamp before blowing it out, the light throwing her face into relief beneath the parted severity of her hair. Even if she couldn't accept a word Sydney had said, there was no use showing her disagreement. It only made her friend furious to have her judgment questioned. "You've always felt that way, haven't you?" she murmured.

The two lay in silence for a time, each immured in her world of thought. All at once Marais broke the stillness. "Aren't you ever going to marry, Sydney?"

"Never."

"Would you live with a man without marrying him?"

"That's exactly what I expect to do—soon."

It was one of Sydney's idiosyncrasies to fall suddenly to sleep after such a thunderbolt. But for a long time Marais lay staring at the cascade of moonlight upon the dim, jeweled colors of her friend's coat and listening to her quiet breathing. Had Sydney thought out what she had said, or was she

merely repeating catch phrases? Would she do such a thing herself? "I don't believe anybody ever lived happily flying in the face of law and order that way. How do people explain it to their children? What would mother say if she could hear Sydney talk?" The very thought made her smile, but Sydney's words had disturbed her and she turned restlessly, then held herself rigid, remembering the sleeper beside her. But her racing thoughts refused to be quieted, and at last she rose softly and began to twist up her hair. In a few moments with Sydney's cape over her shoulders she had slipped down the dark stairs, unbolted the front door, and stepped forth into a fairy world. Nor did she pause until she reached the bluff at the end of the neglected garden where she and Preston had sat that afternoon.

The whole valley lay bathed in unearthly radiance. Here and there along the roads cut with scar-like whiteness across the plain, lights gleamed from some farmhouse hidden in the dark spots of trees. Far away the level scene lost itself in a silver haze, and in the pale sky with its wan glitter of stars the moon swung in chill splendor. The serenity of the scene was like a cool hand on her throbbing temples. Foolish to get wrought up over what Sydney had said. Everything before her certainly expressed law and order. Those houses, the highways had been built according to fixed rules. The fruit trees, the alfalfa fields, the wheat acreage, everything was planted and tended according to the laws controlling it. Why, the very stars above her moved in an ordered fashion. Surely it wasn't left for men to

break the tested government of centuries, believing in that way they'd find freedom.

She turned her head sharply, drawn back to the cliff by the ghost of a sound. But the house rose blackly silent from the blanched garden. Marais shivered and looked again at the windless stretches of light at her feet. In their repose she seemed to find relief from her vague fears and her disturbance at Sydney's words.

The dry grass crackled. Her eyes, fascinated, watched the shadow moving at her feet. Then she raised them to look into those of her host.

"I thought you might be here," said he simply.

So that was the question he was asking her in the hall.

For a time they stood side by side. On the tip of the promontory they seemed poised between sky and earth, the white stillness vibrating all about them.

"We might be all alone in the world," said Marais hurriedly, striving to delay the moment she felt was upon them.

Preston came nearer, as if to become more aware of the softness of her loosened hair, the shining eyes, the pale oval of her face. "You know, don't you, Marais?" he asked hoarsely.

"What?" she whispered.

"I love you, sweetheart. I love you." Then his face was against hers, his lips demanding hers in a long kiss. With incoherent words of love he drew her to the bench. There he took her once more in his arms, covering her forehead, her eyes, her throat with kisses to which she yielded, half in bewilderment. At last with a sob she hid her head upon his shoulder.

"My lovely one," he murmured. She could feel his heart thudding hard against her cheek.

Suddenly he knelt before her and laid his head in her lap with boyish abandon. "Oh, Marais, I need you!"

She touched his thick, close hair, pressing her cheek against his bowed head. Oh, but she would keep him true to his better self!

Somewhere in the house a window sash was lowered with a creak. Marais felt Preston start. He rose, looking apprehensively toward the dark pile. "Come, dearest," he said, "it's very late."

She got up, the warmth about her heart suddenly snapped off. But she forgot her nonplused feeling when on the porch Preston put his arms about her and drew her to him. How his touch melted the whole world into liquid delight which flowed through her veins and enveloped them both in a veil of ecstasy!

Again she stood by the window in her room. So this was love. She hid her face in her hands at the remembrance of that good night kiss; then she undressed and crept in a dream to bed.

CHAPTER IV

"I DON'T BELONG"

MARAIS came sharply out of John Wentworth's office in the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank and hurried along Central Avenue, her head down. When Hay Spinkham passed her with his irascible, kindly "'Day, Marais," she shrank and barely spoke. She turned with relief into the gathering October gloom of College Street, but the sight of her father's palm tree pricking the cold sky above her own mansard roof sent her into the nearest side street. She couldn't face her mother's shrewd eyes with John Wentworth's words still beating against her ears. Not until her thoughts quit racketing around in her head like the dry leaves the gusty fall wind sent in little swirls beneath her feet.

From the moment she had received Mr. Wentworth's note that morning asking her to come to the bank after school, she had known something was wrong. As she met class after class, corrected papers, explained difficult passages to dull students, the question kept gnawing at her nerves, "What does he want?" His request had nothing to do with the money she'd borrowed from him to help out her college expenses. Only in August she'd paid him the last cent, interest and principal, whereupon he had placed his arms suddenly about her and kissed her with such moist fervor full upon the lips that she

had drawn quickly away from his touch and the fiery film of his old eyes. Though he'd hastened to explain, "You're just like my own granddaughter, Marais. David Haliburton's granddaughter shall never want while I'm above ground," his words didn't keep her from uneasiness. She recalled in a new, disagreeable light the many times his wrinkled, manicured hand had slipped up and down her arm as he talked to her, and the fashion he had of edging closer and closer until his body actually pressed against hers. Was he becoming one of those horrid, senile old men she had heard about? But that note, sent by a special messenger, gave her a different feeling from her discomfort at his attitude—a sickening heaviness of heart that had to do with quite another subject.

The first question he asked her across his mahogany desk confirmed her nagging fears. "Are you giving your Uncle Webb money?"

The blood drained from her heart as she shook her head mutely.

The wrinkles in the corners of his eyes closed up in fanlike cunning. "He's showing it pretty freely around town."

Marais had held herself sternly, keeping her eyes on his face, shrunken and less florid than it had been six years ago. "How?" she had asked.

"Gambling."

Just what Salome Buford had said!

She steadied herself by staring at an impertinent glass dog holding down a sheaf of papers on the desk's shining surface. They looked as if they might be subpoenas.

"But where can he get money?" she finally asked.

The banker's eyes remained hard. "I'm not sure. That's why I'm asking you."

A shock of shame and fear for her uncle shook Marais to the soul. "You don't think—he's taking it?" she had stammered.

He shook his bald head slowly. "I don't know." Then as his eyes had rested upon her, his face softened revoltingly. "I don't care as much for that part of it," he had made a silly, grandiloquent gesture, "as I do about shielding your grandfather's name from possible disgrace."

Marais choked at the ignominy of having John Wentworth with that loathsome suggestion in his eyes offer to save the reputation of the Haliburtons.

Then she crushed down her pride. "What can be done? He can't stay on here. He must go clear away from Oakleyville."

Still in his softened mood, John Wentworth had pondered. "I know a man in Berkeley who's decided to take a flyer in the newspaper game—Peter Harnett. Been in the printing business for fifteen years. He writes me he's taken over a small paper called the *Mirror*, and has started on his great adventure. By George, I want to see Peter win so much that I'm going to back him up!"

For a flash Marais was swept by the rash, impossible longing to shift the whole, ugly problem and flee to Berkeley to help this Peter Harnett build up the *Mirror*. The banker's voice recalled her. "Harnett'll do anything I suggest. Webb's got plenty of brains if he'll only straighten up——"

The girl had risen, stung by his contemptuous shrug

"Don't—don't speak of this to my mother, please,

Mr. Wentworth. She has enough on her shoulders," she had murmured. "Perhaps—if you'll ask your friend—I don't know how to thank you—" She had stumbled over the words. After all he'd been kind, and he was Sydney's grandfather, one of their oldest friends.

At her impulsive emotion he took her hands in both of his and drew her so close that she could smell the perfume on his silk handkerchief peeping from his breast pocket. "No, no, that's exactly my idea. We mustn't worry her," he had hastened to acquiesce. "Marais, you're wonderful. If——"

With a revulsion she broke from him and moved hastily to the door. As she stepped into the hall, her heart leaped and quivered in her throat. Jim Hasler and Preston Marbury were walking in deep conversation along the corridor toward the latter's office. When they saw the two in the doorway, old Jim nodded and the younger man bowed formally. Just as if he hadn't seen her on every possible occasion since her visit to Marbury Heights. Preston's manner was sometimes very puzzling. As soon as they had rounded the hall corner John Wentworth motioned Marais back into his office.

"What about that, Marais?" She was no longer afraid of him, for his eyes were again hard. "You know Marbury. Has he ever said anything about old Jim?"

Needle points of fire pricked Marais's face. "Nothing except that they're good friends."

His eyes narrowed. "Too deuced good. I'm supposed to keep an eye on Jim's interests, and as long as we've been friends, he won't take a word from me. It isn't like him to be so friendly with anybody as he

is with Preston Marbury. He's all right, I guess, but you never can tell about these lawyer chaps."

"Preston Marbury's my friend, Mr. Wentworth." Marais faced about sharply. "He wouldn't do anything to harm old Jim——"

She hated the way his eyes gloated over her. "That's right, Marais. Stand up for the people you like. If I could make you blush for me in that style, we'd be off for Europe to-morrow. Come to the bridge tournament Friday evening. I may know something more by that time. And don't worry. If Webb'll only take the chance——"

"If Webb'll only take the chance!" Marais walking slowly along Cemetery Avenue into which she had unconsciously stumbled, knew her uncle couldn't be depended upon to take the chance. He had evaded issues, had chosen the line of least resistance, had failed. All her proud belief in him and in the free, wild gesture with which he had commanded life, had been shattered, and here she was protecting him with fierce tenderness because she knew perfectly well his failure was due not to bad luck, but to his native weakness in the heart of so many gifts. Poor golden eagle!

She walked rapidly past lighted windows through which, had she been less occupied, she could have seen people eating their cheerful evening meals. The gradually narrowing path, the vacant fields, the wide, bare sky formed a vague accompaniment to the pictures which passed through her mind—Uncle Webb whispering to her in the darkness of her room, Uncle Webb driving her home under the stars from the Native Sons' Picnic, Uncle Webb bending over Miss Dot's sleek head, his face as he stared at

the empty opening of the Lost Garden, and as she had seen it the other day in Salome Buford's parlor.

Suddenly she stopped and stared across the white fence. Rows and rows of tombstones and taller shafts pale in the autumn starlight. Without knowing it she had come clear to the cemetery. She crossed the road and leaned over the railing. No failures or heartaches in its quiet aisles. Her mother's lot was over there. She could just make out her father's stone. And to the left, in that clump of tapering cypresses Grandmother Haliburton wouldn't let the superintendent of the cemetery cut down, though he insisted the shade would kill the blue grass, her grandfather was buried. "I'm glad Grandmother had enough spunk to make him leave the trees. They——"

She paused and lifted her head. Silence. She breathed again.

A sob broke the profound stillness. She strained forward. It came once more—a long, inarticulate groan—a man's voice.

She turned in swiftly at the entrance gate and moved along the driveway toward her grandfather's grave. Across it she could make out the body of a man. Lying face down. Even its abandonment of despair held a grace that was unmistakably familiar. She tried to shut out the long sighs which seemed torn from the very earth. It was terrible to invade a privacy as bitter as this. Then she stooped and touched the heaving shoulders. "Uncle Webb," she said gently, "what is it?"

He sprang to his feet and faced her wildly. "What do you want?" he panted.

Her heart fell sick at the sudden terror in his

face marred and ravaged by tears. She shook her head. "I was just walking out this way and heard sounds from the road. I came in to see what was the matter."

"Nothing." He turned away from her searching eyes. "There's nothing the matter."

As he stood forth from the shadows the starlight revealed the gaunt hopelessness of his face. But there still clung about his thrown-back head an indescribable grace of bearing which seemed to communicate itself to David Haliburton's monument between the cypresses, making of the whole a picture of dignity and dark remoteness.

"I tell you there's nothing the matter," he reiterated stubbornly.

"What have you done?" asked Marais slowly.

Again she felt the white blot of his face congeal with fear. "What have I done?" he repeated in a whisper. "God, what haven't I done?" He turned away with a groan.

She knew that his suffering at that moment was not for one deed, but for the reckless wasting of his life. Suddenly she realized she was in the grip of a great opportunity. The repression from her mother's discipline, the influence of her grandmother's entrenched belief in the divine right of men of the family melted in her compassion. Uncle Webb's liberation lay in her willingness to strike at the very reserves which had so long protected his weaknesses.

"How can you talk that way?" she asked sternly, shaking so that she was forced to steady herself against her grandfather's shaft.

He was on the point of leaving her. She pressed

her hands hard against the marble to gain strength from its firmness. "Webb, it isn't too late." He wavered, turned toward her, compelled by her voice.

As he lifted his haggard eyes to her face, she saw that he was listening with desperate intentness.

"You have ability. You can come back." She chose her words with measured care. This moment mustn't be spoiled by a false move.

"What can I do?"

"Stay here and prove to Oakleyville what kind of a man you are."

He laughed and she knew she had struck the wrong note.

"Oakleyville already knows what kind of a man I am," he sneered.

She felt him recede from her as a wave slips back from the shore to be lost in the ocean. "But you have hosts of friends here." Her tone was sharp with anxiety.

"Friends." He threw back his head with the well-remembered gesture of disdain. "Friends who pity me behind my back, and choke me with cordiality to my face. I can do without them."

"Oakleyville hasn't done so badly by you."

"Oakleyville." The whisper barely reached Marais, but she saw him turn his face toward the glow which the lights of the town cast in the heavens.

"You don't hold the town responsible for your—mistakes?"

"Oh, no, I'm merely amused at the foolishness of a human being who believes he can ever escape from such a place." Suddenly he came close to her, his derision gone. "The whole thing's been wrong. There wasn't enough of the right kind of pressure

put on me when I was a kid. Pa was too busy saving souls, and ma didn't discipline me, except to make me go to church all day. God, but those Sundays were awful. Why, when I was just a little shaver, I used to sit in the old meetinghouse and tremble to think of the hell-fire waiting to burn me to a crisp. If the folks had just explained to me——"

"Of course they did their best." Marais murmured.

"Oh, I'm not blaming them. But if I'd had a profession——" He began to pace the turf with long, uneven strides. "Small-town politics are all right while they last, but it's hell for a man when he's out of the running with nothing else in sight. I used to wonder what was on the cards when my final term of office ran out."

Marais was silent. He seemed to take a kind of tortured relief in talking.

"I tried to forget—in having a good time with the gang."

She interrupted him bluntly. "They've most of them turned out pretty well."

He turned away from her. "Yes," said he grimly. "They have backbone. I'm different. Something happened one night that finished everything for me."

The moonlit picture of the Lost Garden, its empty doorway and that desolation in her uncle's face—it was all in the girl's memory too. But she dismissed the vision resolutely. "It needn't be," she affirmed stoutly. "Your life before that time was worth while. You were the leader of your friends. They looked up to you, and you responded to their belief in you. Well, that's past and gone. But you

are you just the same. Your ability is yours as much as it ever was. If you see your mistakes so clearly, why can't you see the way out?"

He shook his head. "I don't belong. The past is gone. I've no place in the present. As for the future——"

She shrank from the abyss which apparently confronted him. "Would you like to leave Oakleyville?" she asked.

"Yes, and what's more, I intend to. There's no hell for a man who's down and out like the town where he was born and raised. He can't get away from himself nor anybody else."

"Well, why don't you go to Berkeley?"

"To Berkeley?"

"Mr. Wentworth knows a man who has bought a paper there. He would take you on. If you want to get away from Oakleyville, there's your chance."

"Did John Wentworth tell you to suggest that to me?" He grasped her arm like a vise.

"No, but it would be worth while to speak to him about it. Don't wait. Talk to him to-morrow."

"That's a good idea. I'll look into it." The evasion in his tone erected a wall between them. She knew it was useless to say more. She could only hope.

"I must be going home. Will you come?" she asked.

"No, I'll stay a while longer with pa. I've got one comfort. He hasn't lived to see what a monument I am to his work in Oakleyville."

No use. She had lost him entirely. As she made her way out of the cemetery, she did not carry with her the picture of Webb Haliburton as she last saw

him, alone and defiant by the cypress tree. Instead she remembered the fright in his face when she had first touched his quivering shoulder. She had no answer for that.

CHAPTER V

THE SHATTERED IMAGE

MARAIS wouldn't have gone to the charity bridge tournament given by the Women's Improvement Club at John Wentworth's house except for his suggestion that day at his office. "Better be at the bridge tournament Friday night. I may know something more by that time." And for another reason which brought the color to her cheeks when she thought of it as she dressed with unusual care for the evening, pinning her amber braids in a leaflike crown about her head and putting on a white chiffon dress which brought out the long darkness of her eyes and her mouth's questioning crimson.

She knew Preston would be late to the tournament. He had told her the evening before as they stood together on Mrs. Plover's porch after bidding Sydney good-by—Sydney who was flying back to San Francisco to lead the Junior Cotillion. A lawsuit in Sacramento would force him to take a later train back to Oakleyville. But he made his excuses so tenderly that Marais dismissed as unworthy the fleeting suspicion that he'd rather appear alone at the Wentworth house, and dressed in thrilled anticipation of their meeting. Even in the midst of her anxiety for her uncle whom she had not seen since that night in the cemetery, in spite of her mother's stubborn prejudice, she had her dawning love for

Preston and its ardent return to sustain and comfort her. Nothing was going to take that away from her. Nothing!

Mr. Wentworth met her with the significant whisper, "I've got something to tell you after a while." From that moment everything, even Preston's coming, took on a merely pictorial aspect; the great, green-garlanded rooms lighted by the cut-glass chandeliers and the fires leaping on the brass andirons, Mrs. Sharsbury in tight black satin that made her look for all the world like an animated pin-cushion topped by a white china face marshaling with fussy, presidential importance the players to their various tables, her mother rigidly genial, trumping with calm triumph the trick of Mrs. Dwight Brockett, a trifle uneasy for all her armor of lavender powder and corn-colored, silk chiffon, Mr. Wentworth, the generous, ever present host in sleek broadcloth and staring shirt front, pausing near her with that look in his bleared eyes, half of pity, half of that other revolting emotion she wouldn't name; faces of people she knew all about her, smiling, nodding, turning, and finally in the intermission for refreshments, when the aroma of coffee began to make promontories in the heated atmosphere of clinking spoons and plates, Preston threading his way through the crowd, in his eyes that dark smile which she knew would glow more warmly when they rested upon her.

As in a dream she began to tent the cards on the green baize of the table, keeping her eyes upon the task of making them balance against one another. As in a dream she heard his low voice, "Are you a snowbird ready for flight?—you lovely thing!"

Her own answer was cool with sudden perversity. "I'm glad you find me satisfying to the eye."

She watched his face kindle at the challenge of something to be conquered anew.

"Not to the eye alone," he murmured warmly.

Marais laughed mockingly. "Then I haven't lived in vain."

"What do you mean?" He turned his handsome shoulder so that the others couldn't hear.

"Merely that for once I've fulfilled my function in life." She proceeded casually with her card building.

"Which is—" persisted Marbury.

She lifted her dark brows. "Why, pleasing the male, of course."

"If I really thought you lived to please one male, Marais—" He leaned closer.

"Oh!" She gazed at the level table, still shaking from his movement. "Just look what you've done to my castle——"

She broke off suddenly. The groups of people had shifted, and through the irregular pattern of heads she beheld Mr. Wentworth looking at her steadily, saw him move his head with an imperceptible gesture toward the conservatory. She rose abruptly, a lapful of cards slithering to her feet, the jack of hearts gleaming redly on top of the heap.

"I must see Mr. Wentworth." She turned a moment to Preston.

At the sudden cutting off of a tilt of wits given substance by its emotional excitement, Preston bit his lip. But when he saw the color fade from her cheeks until her eyes, wide apart, made beneath their brows that dark, tragic band across her face, he rose

at once and offered her his arm. He held her back, however, long enough to murmur, "I've got to drive into the country to-morrow. It's Saturday. Can't you come with me?" but had to be contented with her hesitating reply, "Yes—that is—unless something comes up to take me downtown." How did she know what Mr. Wentworth had to tell her?

Two—three steps forward, and Marais was halted by a stir at the other end of the room. Who was Mrs. Sharsbury shaking hands with—that tall young man with the dark, tumbled hair, whose shoulders looked so broad in their dress coat? Now she had placed her hand on his arm and was guiding him in her fussy way on what appeared to be a triumphal progress down the long room, stopped now and again by exclamations and handshakes which greeted the stranger who had such a familiar air to the girl's startled eyes. John Wentworth had joined them now, was clapping the man on the back, turning him about, shaking him by both hands, looking into his bronzed face on a level with his wrinkled one, calling out in his most hospitable tone, "Well, by George, after all these years it's great to see you back again. We hear great things about your bridges and dams. Boy, you're a giant. Why didn't you get here earlier? And what's this I hear about your leaving to-morrow?"

When the stranger turned his face full upon her Marais stood there, her knees shaking like John Wentworth's eucalyptus trees in a north wind. For a moment she thought she was going to faint. "This wasn't the way I had dreamed we'd meet, Dan." He had seen her—had left the others and was moving toward her. As he drew nearer she felt rather than

saw that his gaze was directed searchingly upon her, saw without looking at the swarthy face, the square jaw, and smiling mouth, the dark, stormy eyes beneath the lock of hair which fell with persistent awkwardness over his forehead.

She let go of Preston's arm, as unconscious of him as though he were the air she was inhaling in quick gulps. The room was swept as clean as the floor of the Red Sea must have been when the waters rolled back for Moses and the children of Israel. Just Dan and she were there, and he was looking at her as quizzically as on the enchanted day they had sat in the old cottonwood tree at Fowler's munching apples and watching the dappled water flow away to the foot of the rainbow while they built air castles made of the smell of fruit blossoms, the hum of bees, and glimpses of April blue through the shimmer of cottonwood leaves. Why did that tug at her heart, the oddest mixture of pain and happiness she'd ever felt, actually paralyze her tongue? It was physical. She raised her hand as if to push it off and Dan stepped across the open space between them, right through the rushing waters of the Red Sea. He had her fingers in his. He was saying in that same mellow, husky voice, "How-d'ye-do, Marais? It's been a long time since I've seen you."

The steady ring of his voice, the compelling look in his eye—something woke her suddenly to the reason for her violent trembling. "It's because he left me. I don't suppose I'll ever really forgive him for that." In a revelatory flash she was able for the first time to read her feelings regarding him. He was related now—he as well as her mother—to the things against which she stood in continual rebel-

lion—the damming of joy, the desertion of hope, the thwarting of individuality. No matter how she reasoned out the wisdom of his going away, she was flooded by the long pent-up storm of hurt pride, resentment, and bruised memories. She didn't know she could hate any one as she did Dan.

She shook herself together. What a goose to stand there staring at him as though he were anything but a stranger to her! What must these people think? Which had they been in her dream—the children of Israel or the wicket followers of Pharaoh? Poor things! They didn't know. She almost laughed aloud as their rows of faces came again into her vision. They were as unconscious as so many cabbages that they'd been watching a little drama when they saw Dan and her looking at one another across a gulf of seven years, saw her merely touch his outstretched hand a moment, and reply carelessly before she moved on, "How-d'ye-do, Dan? Yes, it has been a long time."

In her moment of realization, Marais obeyed mechanically the impulse which had started her across the floor. She resumed Preston's arm, sensing the fact that his face had stiffened, and that he was barely acknowledging Dan's "Hello, Marbury. Haven't seen you for a century. How goes it?" and without a look in Dan's direction, kept on toward the spot where John Wentworth stood awaiting her.

When Preston had excused himself and left them, she asked in low, hurried tones, "It is about Uncle Webb?" searching his face for his answer.

He nodded and, quite unconscious that the sharp gaze of one woman followed them closely, led the way into the conservatory off the back parlor.

There, by the rim of the fountain into whose depths a bronze Narcissus stared at his graceful image, Marais paused and faced the banker, grasping the fluted marble till her knuckles strained bone white.

"What has he done?" she asked brusquely.

On his face had settled a look of stern gravity.

"He has stolen money," he returned slowly.

Marais closed her eyes. Stolen money—Uncle Webb—her beautiful, golden eagle—it couldn't be; not Uncle Webb. There was some mistake—somebody else— Into the confused mass of her frightened excuses came the terror-stricken look of his face when she had touched him on the shoulder in the cemetery. That look had haunted her. Oh, it was true. Nothing—not the romantic past, his reckless freedom, the luck with which he had for so long escaped consequences—nothing could keep her from facing the ugly fact. What would her mother say?

"Where did he get it?" she asked him haggardly.

"From the bank."

"How much did he take?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Where is he now?"

"Under watch in the Central House."

She shivered and hid her face. John Wentworth went up to her and laid both hands upon her suddenly shrinking shoulders. "I've taken care of the thing, Marais." He spoke softly into her ear. "You can have your own time to pay it back—without interest. You know that. You know——"

She straightened up. "It's going to be terrible for my mother——"

The crash of something fallen to the tessellated

floor broke into her painful words. She looked around, startled.

"It's nothing," Mr. Wentworth reassured her. "Just a date palm that's too heavy. Yes," he went on, "your mother'll have to know. I talked to you first, Marais, because I thought you and I might find a way out."

She refused to meet his significant gaze. Why did he try to inject meanings into everything he said to her? And now, of all times.

"There is no way." Suddenly the hardness of her voice broke with passion. "Oakleyville is to blame for this. I told him it wasn't true; but it is. The men who are big enough leave. The little ones trim their sails to the small-town standards. But there are some that can't fit in. They aren't strong enough to go, and yet they feel they could have been something if they'd been born somewhere else. I know just how Uncle Webb suffers with the people on Central Avenue smirking at him and nudging and winking behind his back. Oh, it's wicked. That's what it is." She swallowed the sobs that choked her words.

"Well, he needn't have done just this." Mr. Wentworth's voice was hard with common sense.

Marais's laughter was bitter-edged. "I don't know yet what he has done. How did he get the money?"

"From one of the safe-deposit boxes."

Still she looked questioning.

"You know the little room where the depositors take their boxes to look over their effects. One of them was in there sorting over papers and accidentally dropped an envelope. It contained a thou-

sand dollars in bills. Webb stepped in to turn the light out and found it."

"How do you know?"

"He confessed."

The dripping of the fountain devastating Narcissus's image was all that broke the silence. Marais watched with swimming eyes the shattered figure. So this was the end of her uncle's career. In trying to slip from under the rigidity of the Hali-burton yoke he had wandered onto boggy ground and sunk into the slime. And there seemed to be nothing she could do to help him. But there must be some way by which one could avoid such pitfalls as he had encountered, as well as the stern law of her mother. "I'll find it if it takes me till doomsday," she murmured between set teeth. "It may be too late for Uncle Webb, but it's not for me."

CHAPTER VI

MRS. PLOVER'S WAY OUT

THE next morning Marais, the fur collar of her coat buttoned up about her chin, pushed open the tall, glass doors of the Central House office where three or four idlers tipped back in chairs against the wall stared at her approach with the vacuity of people who hang about small-town hotels. She walked up to the battered counter behind which stood Jim Majors, the day clerk who for fifteen years had silently and efficiently served the Central House. Ever since Marais was a small girl she had been used to the sight of this solitary man taking his evening walk past her mother's house followed by his pet bulldog Durham, cursed with a face as much like a bulldog's as his own. But she had never been afraid of his jowled grimness, knowing as she did that he was a stanch friend of Uncle Webb's, as well as an old-time, honorary member of the gang.

At her low question he lifted an unmoved countenance from his ledger. "No, he's not here," he scowled at her impersonally.

Marais clung to the counter. "But I'm sure he was here—last night," she insisted.

The clerk shook his head. "He isn't here now." His tone of finality left but one course open to her.

On the sidewalk she scanned with a heavy heart the busy street. Where was Uncle Webb right now?

Had he already left town? Would she ever see him again?

It was surprising that she didn't anticipate seeing Dan. But their encounter the evening before had been, so far as she was concerned, the beginning and end of a hateful episode. She wasn't interested in his reason for being in Oakleyville, the length of his stay, the time of his leaving. Her only feeling toward him this raw morning was one of utter dislike. The idea of his stopping her in the middle of the floor as he had done! He had left her suddenly enough. Why didn't he stay away?

On the thrust of that last angry question she turned the Central House corner sharply and started along College Street. But the outlines of the houses, every window and door of which were as known to her as the faces of her family, brought her up with the problem of how she was going to meet her mother. No further excuse for not telling her. But at the thought of facing Mrs. Plover's stern eyes which seemed already to accuse her for the very news, fear leaped upon her, pressing its talons into her shrinking mind.

The sharp tattoo of horse's hoofs on the hard street succeeded by silence roused her from the unhappy prospect. Looking around she saw that Preston Marbury had drawn up to the curb, his eyes shining beneath the fur of his beaver hat, his lithe body bent forward.

"What luck! I missed you at your house and your mother said she didn't know where you had gone. Ready to go?" He stepped out quickly in his fashion, which Marais had caught, of taking for granted the things he wished to happen.

Her heart lifted. Here was somebody she needed and who needed her. Perhaps she could confide to him the tangle of her difficulty.

But once in the buggy with the bear robe tucked securely about her knees and the cold breeze on her cheek where a vein still throbbed in distress, she didn't find it so easy to speak. Uncle Webb's disgrace was a fact that belonged to her mother and herself. How could she tell any one else that he had not only stolen money, but had slipped away, leaving two women to bear the burden of his theft?

"Do you mind stopping at the stable a moment? There's something the matter with this horse's leg." She was relieved at Preston's interruption of her thoughts.

Watching his light grace in contrast to the bulky effectiveness of the overalled stableman as the two bent over the upturned hoof, she was suddenly aware of a hunched figure raising itself slowly from the curb. It took a second look to prove that the bloodshot eyes and unkempt dress belonged to Jim Hasler. As Preston jumped into the buggy and took the reins, he did not see the ugly snarl which the old man directed toward him, or if he did he made no sign. But Marais couldn't forget the gleaming fangs.

They drove in silence past the old Central Avenue schoolhouse, past the Southern Pacific passenger station, and until the new warehouse at the edge of town where Theodore worked was far behind them. Low over the flat country sloping gradually from either side of the highway the tule fog was already rolling out. Along Cache Creek running muddily bank high, clumps of mistletoe clung to the bare

branches of oaks dark against the rifted sky. The definiteness of crossing a bridge brought to Marais's lips the question quivering in her mind.

"Preston, are you going to buy Jim Hasler's place?"

At his name the young man turned with sudden ardor. But her query darkened his face as the fall of the curtain blots out the stage glow. "I've already done so," he said shortly.

Marais watched a flock of blackbirds rise with wooden clatter and admirable unanimity from the glistening field. "Is old Jim satisfied?" Her eyes were still on the birds as they settled a safer distance from the road, a dark spot in the lifting mist.

Preston gave his characteristic shrug. "Old people are so childish you never can tell when they are pleased. But their moods don't amount to anything."

"Old Jim's moods amount to something," she observed quietly. "He's a dangerous person when he is aroused."

The horse leaped forward under the whip's sharp flick. "Does buying a house justify its former owner in sticking a knife in your back?" Preston flashed at her a look quivering with irritation.

At the sight of her eyes dark with pain he bit his lip. "That's what comes of even bordering on business subjects with women." He patted her arm with enforced gayety.

"Then you think men and women should never discuss business of any kind?" Her hands clasped one another tightly beneath the robe. If only he would answer her so that she could claim the help of his

man's judgment. But he still preserved his bantering tone.

"Woman has but one business. And you fulfilled it most wonderfully last night. Marais, I wonder if you know how beautiful you were?" He dropped to a lower note.

Her hands fell apart. What was the use? Like every one else Preston was outside her zone of isolation.

The tone of his swift question showed her that he had sensed her retreat from him. "What is it, Marais? You know I love you." He looked tenderly at her face pale beneath its tricornered hat, and his voice rang with a deeper note of passion.

But she shrank still further within herself. Preston's nearness and the warmth of his speech ought to have brought her happiness and security; but they did neither. It amazed her to find out that one's love for a person could fluctuate so, and so persist, that it could come and go like breathing. Hot with shame she wondered if she was a fickle creature tiring of her lover before he had time to propose, suspicious of him at the ugly glance of a doddering old man.

"Do you?" She rallied herself with a conscience-stricken attempt at lightness.

The young man flushed darkly and put his arms suddenly about her, so suddenly that she yielded in surprise to his embrace as the willing horse stopped. Then she broke away from him. "Not in the public road," she murmured.

He gathered up the reins in silence at the rebuff. From time to time as they drove on she stole a glance at his gloomy profile. Finally she ventured to break

the awkward stillness. "Did you have a good time last night?"

"If a good time consists in hearing the praises of one person sung the whole evening." Preston still kept his eyes ahead.

"Who was the favored one?"

"Dan Stillman."

The name was suddenly blazoned in the pale heavens before her startled eyes.

"After I left you with Mr. Wentworth I had the pleasure of sitting for an hour at one table hearing his greatness exploited by your Oakleyvillites."

Under other circumstances she would have smiled at the jealous irony of his tone, but now the uncontrollable thrill which shook her at the mention of Dan's name filled her with astonishment.

"To top off the record of being the most remarkable boy in the country, as well as a world-beating engineer in foreign parts, he's been appointed to the job of consulting engineer of the Pacific Electric Company with headquarters in San Francisco. A whole epic in one sentence."

So after Idaho, Russia, and South America Dan had come back to live in California. A warmth began to tingle about Marais's heart. Immediately she sat bolt upright, filled with distress and self-loathing. What on earth did she mean by being glad because Dan Stillman had come home, when she hated the very mention of his name?

"I can tell you even more," Preston went on. "His duties are so pressing that he could only take the night off to see his family. And he's gone back to the city this morning to shape the destiny of civil

engineering in the West. Oh, I'm well posted on the subject.

"By Jove," his voice hardened as he flung off the thin veil of satire, "I never could see anything in that fellow. He was at the university for a while. Played football and was a pretty fair student. But he never had a particle of interest in any one but himself. Egotistical ass!"

"That isn't true. He's tremendously interested in people." Marais was astounded at the vehemence of her tone. "He left college because he wanted to know more about people and their problems and—and he felt suffocated in that small world."

The young man's whistle was a lash across her face. "So—you've joined the ranks of hero worshippers too. Well, all I've got to say is that a man who trades on the problems of the world to impress people with his own greatness is a cad."

At the biting scorn of his words the blood surged to her temples. "Dan Stillman wouldn't stoop to that kind of thing any sooner than—you would." Even in her gust of passion she was conscious of her hesitation, her latent lack of belief in the comparison.

"Oh, wouldn't he? Your faith in human nature is wonderful." Suddenly he turned on her. "Why are you such a champion of Stillman? Was he an old lover of yours?"

At her silence, her cheeks dashed with scarlet, and her involuntary recoil from him, Preston caught her shoulders. "Was he?" he insisted.

Still she kept silent.

"Don't be afraid." An ashen line settled about

his mouth. "I never make love to a girl who's interested in another man—even if she pretends to like me."

He let her go as suddenly as he had seized her, and Marais sank back in her corner in mingled anger and humiliation. Not another word was spoken between them during the trip. Preston transacted his business with a farmer and drove home in a black and impenetrable gloom. Marais smiled ironically at her relief when, with elaborate courtesy, he assisted her to alight at Mrs. Plover's gate. Quite different from her eagerness to go with him in order to escape facing her mother with the facts about Uncle Webb.

As she entered the sitting-room, Mrs. Plover was standing by the window watching Preston drive away. The firelight pushed the dusk into the corners where it lingered beside the tall bookcase and gathered in the folds of the old woven portières hiding the closet which ran back under the stairs. Marais paused in front of the fireplace and loosened the collar of her coat. She wished passionately that the moment could stretch out into an eternity of silence. Her desire was so intense, the struggle to speak so difficult that the very dusk throbbed with the conflict. Surely her mother, islanded by the window in the peaceful gloom, must feel her thoughts drawing her involuntarily into the tragic circle which must inevitably include them both. She opened her lips.

"Jim Hasler has lost his home. Did you know it?" Mrs. Plover half turned from the window to address her daughter.

Marais caught at the back of a chair for support. Then every fiber in her body stiffened. "No."

"Well, he has. They say Preston Marbury swindled him out of it, and the old man's nearly crazy."

Marais threw up her head. Regardless of the recent scene between them, Preston was her friend—more than that. "It isn't true, mother," she exclaimed warmly. "He bought the house outright."

"Are you sure he really bought it?"

The girl flushed at the skepticism of Mrs. Plover's tone. "He told me so not more than an hour ago."

When her mother faced about Marais noted that her face beneath its rigid pompadour shone with a wan transparency. Her next abrupt question was without apparent relevance. "Marais, has Preston Marbury asked you to marry him?"

The darkness hid the crimson which dyed the girl's temples. In her silence she was amazed that honesty forced her to answer to herself in the negative a question to which instinct prompted her to say yes. Wasn't she engaged to Preston? Hadn't he by every act and word shown that he loved her? But when she faced the fact bluntly, he had not asked her to marry him.

"I can't make you answer. But don't let him lay the weight of his hand on you until he does. That's just plain, common sense."

A fumbling at the dining-room door interrupted the rest of Mrs. Plover's warning. In the dim square of light a bent figure faltered on the threshold. "'Gusta," it was Grandmother Haliburton's shrunken voice, "have you brought my son?"

When Mrs. Plover returned from taking the old

woman back to her room, Marais made a step forward. "Mother—I—"

"She is more restless than usual to-night." Mrs. Plover stooped to poke up the fire. "I don't like the way she looks a bit."

"Mother," Marais's face gleamed with desperate determination in the glancing fire. "I've something to tell you."

"Won't it keep till morning? Somehow I'm a little tired."

The girl shook her head. The time for delay had passed. "No, it's got to be now."

"Well, what is it?"

Marais's throat closed up. She tried twice to speak and the sound of her voice when it came was wholly unnatural. "Uncle Webb has taken money from the bank."

A brief silence followed. Mrs. Plover straightened up slowly and brushed the splinters of wood from her hands, her face still in the shadow.

Marais went on: "Mr. Wentworth has replaced the sum. We can have time to pay it back. And Uncle Webb has gone." Her voice broke on the last word. Two tears rolled down her cheeks and glistened in dripping lines on her coat.

Mrs. Plover moved so that the glow fell on her face. It bore a look of noble strength such as Marais had seen there only during the days following her father's death. "The thousand dollars is paid back," said she quietly.

"Paid back?"

"Yes."

"But how did you know it was a thousand dollars? How did you know—anything about it?"

“I overheard you and John Wentworth talking in the conservatory last night. When you spoke to him and the two of you went in there, I followed and stood behind some palms. It looked better for the three of us to go in together, anyway.”

Marais missed the unconscious humor of the last remark. She heard again the crash of a date palm as it struck the stone floor of the conservatory. “Where did you get the money?” she asked.

Mrs. Plover stood a stanch figure in the flickering light. “I mortgaged the house.”

CHAPTER VII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

THAT night the last vestige of mist rolled away and left the world wrapped in bitter clearness. Marais, huddled beneath the warmth of added blankets, felt the cold to her marrow. She lay rigid in the crackling silence, her mind churning over and over her mother's words, "I have mortgaged the house." Ever since Mrs. Plover uttered them the humiliating conviction had forced itself upon the girl that her high-handed intention had come to nothing. "I thought Mr. Wentworth and I could handle the thing better than mother could. And the minute she knew, she did the one thing to save us from galling obligation and to protect Uncle Webb."

Mrs. Plover had walked out of her front gate that morning to discharge her mission at the bank without a shadow of wavering, nor one regretful glance behind her. She had sat opposite John Wentworth and transacted her business without the slightest dramatic flourish. If there had been any gesture, it was that of a surgeon making a clean, incisive cut. The girl felt a glow of pride all over her dulled body. Nobody knew better than she Mrs. Plover's dread of the very word "mortgage." She could never forget the time her mother had said as solemnly as if she were repeating a vow, "Your father's life paid for the roof over our heads. We must try to keep

it free for his sake." Yet when the time came to deliver herself once more to days and nights of anxiety, she acted. No shrinking, no uncertainty, no self-questionings. Unflinching decision.

"We'll hear from Webb. He won't leave without a word," Mrs. Plover had said in the darkening sitting-room with conviction, her face already haggard in renunciation.

Where was he now? The darkness brought no reply. Did the dogs always howl on nights when lonely souls took up their pilgrimages away from familiar haunts? Tears rolled across Marais's temples and thudded on the pillow. Then she became aware of a low, broken cry, so cunningly woven with the night and the chill silence that for a while she had accepted it as the distress of her own thoughts. But it recurred with such whining persistency that she knew it was somewhere in the house.

She sat erect. At a padded step on the stair she was upright and had swung out of bed. "In this wretched cold, too," she exclaimed, slipping her arms into her dressing gown. "It's enough to kill her."

The hall was grayed by the faint light of a late moon through the transome over the front door. It fell on a bowed figure clinging to the stair rail. At intervals came the moan Marais had heard, craftily softened to prevent discovery. For all her childishness Grandmother Haliburton was a shrewd one.

Something forbade the girl to speak. Silently she followed her grandmother making her way down the steps as though warily conscious of the watcher behind her. Many a night she had observed the old

woman this way when the house was wrapped in slumber. In the darkness she moved with amazing agility. Not a dish on the china-closet shelf that she didn't finger. Not a plate of food left in the pantry but she sampled it. At first Mrs. Plover and Marais had interfered, but she persisted stubbornly in the habit. And finally in despair they had locked up all food, put the best dishes out of reach, and left her to search at will through cupboards and drawers, murmuring when they were awakened by the faint crash of a plate or the rattle of a falling pan, "It's only grandmother on one of her times."

But to-night her search was for something besides food. From the moment Marais beheld her on the stairs she knew the old woman had some deeper project in mind. It was evident in the firm grasp of her bony hands upon the rail and in the thrust of her head forward in the darkness. The girl dared not interrupt this unusual fixity of purpose. From the hall she moved stealthily into the sitting-room. With wary caution she felt her way along the walls, her hands creeping dryly over the paper. She didn't miss an object. Her dim eyes sought to pierce the icy gloom behind curtains, under chairs, and by the bookcase. And all the while she was whispering to herself words which Marais couldn't distinguish, stopping now and again to whine like an animal whose pain is not physical but of the heart. Once she grasped the handle of the door opening on the side porch and turned it convulsively. When she paused by the faded light of the window, she lifted her hands—dreadful, empty, clutching hands—as though supplicating God who, in spite of her stark adherence to duty, had left her in darkness and

alone. At length she sank to her knees and fell to groping beneath the long center table. The whisper rose to a wail.

"Why can't I find him? He must be here. Will nobody help me? Oh, my God in heaven, why do they keep my boy out in the cold? I've lost him. Oh, I've lost him." She fell on her face, moving her head from side to side, her cries once more muffled.

Breaking the spell which had held her speechless, Marais flung herself beside the prone figure. "Grandmother, don't cry. I'm here with you," she whispered, sheltering the disheveled, gray head on her breast. Numb with cold and misery, she laid her cheek against the wet, wrinkled one, unable to answer the questions which thronged her mind.

A stiffening of her grandmother's gaunt form recalled the girl. Wrenching herself free, the old woman made a step forward and stretched out her trembling arms. "There's Webb. I knew he'd come." Her voice rose triumphantly full and resonant.

Marais stared over her bowed shoulders at the moonlit, uncovered window. Pressed against the glass was a man's livid face, staring at the two dim figures there—the broken, crouching old woman, the girl back of her, gazing in the direction of her pointing, tremulous finger.

"Don't you see him? There!" insisted Grandmother Haliburton.

"Yes," whispered Marais. "I see."

The next moment the moon was obscured and the old woman cowered, whimpering. "Marais, why don't you take me to bed? I'm cold." She clutched the girl's arm and huddled closer to her. "Fix me a

bowl of milk, won't you? But don't you tell that woman. She won't let me eat at night."

"Come, grandmother." Marais led her toward her room.

At the sitting-room door she glanced back fearfully at the window. It was vacant.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO LETTERS—AND THEN ANOTHER ONE

THE following Monday, a day of high, swinging winds, loose clouds, and snatches of raindrops, Marais received two letters on the four o'clock delivery, each one post marked Oakleyville—an unusual occurrence. Claspings them tightly in her cold hand, she ran upstairs to her room and carried them to the window where she scrutinized the envelopes anxiously.

One superscription on correct, gray paper was in a small handwriting as beautiful and perfect as copperplate, the other that of a large, unformed hand on a nondescript envelope with a trail of ink where the blotter had slipped on the word "Oakleyville."

Finally she opened the first one. Before she had finished reading the page the words were swimming in the tears which overflowed her eyes. Dashing them away she read over again the phrases of her first love letter—the ardent words under which the heaviness weighting her breast ever since her drive with Preston on Saturday melted into liquid warmth. He loved her, said the letter. He wished he had her in his arms at that moment to prove it to her. Would she forgive his unpardonable rudeness of Saturday? He was on his knees before her. And would she go with him to Marbury Heights for the week-end? It had been fine to have

Sydney, but this time he wanted just her to make it perfect. She must come. If she knew how much he needed her, she wouldn't have the heart to refuse. And he was ever her devoted P. M.

He cared. In spite of all her doubts it was wonderfully, incredibly true. The letter said so. Nothing hidden or evasive about that declaration. Instead, the insistence, the beloved, bold, almost rough insistence of its tone, its command, its entreaty, drew her quite out of herself. She lifted the paper to her lips just where he had appended his initials. Then she blushed at her folly and picked up the other letter abruptly. It ran:

DEAR MISS PLOVER: Can you come to see me some time soon? If you would rather have me come to you, let me know.

Yours sincerely,
SALOME BUFFORD.

An hour later she sat face to face with Salome in her little, square sitting-room. Salome herself was thinner than when Marais had last seen her. The heaviness of her cheeks was gone, her light hair had no loose ends, about the whole woman there was a quiet, dogged competence. When she looked at Marais the girl saw how steady and blue her eyes were. Suddenly she realized that here was a person she would like to know better.

"I'm much obliged to you for coming to see me," she said simply. "Your Uncle Webb was here most of the day he left town and I thought you and your mother would like to know."

Her visitor's eyes darkened with sudden resentment that this outsider should be able to speak casu-

ally of her uncle's movements when at home they knew no more about him than if they were strangers.

"Jim Majors let him out of the Central House," continued Salome. "He came here and spent Saturday. That night he went away."

In spite of her surging bitterness Marais was curiously conscious that to Salome all nonessentials had been eclipsed by some vital, overwhelming decision.

"Where did he go?" she asked briefly.

"North."

Uncle Webb on his way north. At that word "north" the shabby walls with their incongruous hangings vanished. Before her rose dark belts of marching pines, rivers tearing their deep-worn way between cragged walls of granite, and range upon range of snow mountains ending in the mists of infinity. Her imagination had always clothed the region with grandeur and the terror of stark silence. Now its loneliness was made greater by the gaunt figure of her uncle, his head thrown back, that reckless, beaten look in his eyes. Going north. Through the wild, majestic country of her dreams he made his way toward limitless wastes of snow.

"He'll never come back." She spoke more to herself than to Salome.

"No." The other woman shook her head.

Marais struck her hands together sharply. "He might at least have said good-by."

Salome regarded her quivering face with grave compassion. "He did. He said, 'Tell them I love them and God bless and keep them.'"

The tears were running over Marais's pale cheeks. Her mother had been right. He hadn't left without

a word. Then her brows drew together again. "But why didn't he tell us himself?"

"He couldn't. He was ashamed."

"But he came to you."

"He knew I'd understand. I've been ashamed too."

The plain figure was all at once invested with dignity in the girl's eyes. "You don't—blame him for what he did?" she faltered.

Salome's face became very grave. "I'm sorry about the affair at the bank. It means such a burden for your mother and you." Then her eyes crinkled. "As far as Webb's concerned, I'm glad it's over."

Marais could scarcely believe her ears. "What do you mean?"

"Now that the thing is done, there's not so much to worry about," said Salome practically. "Webb was headed downhill. I've seen people going that way before. Nobody can stop them. Talking does no good. You have to give them their heads. As I told him, now that he's reached bottom, he'll begin to travel up again."

"Do you know where he's going first?" Marais put the question timidly. She was the outsider now.

"He'll let me know." Salome paused a little. "Then I'm going, too."

Marais turned white to the lips. "You—you—are you——"

Salome shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm just going to be near him. He was more than a brother to me once when I needed help. He's made a mistake, but he's a fine man. My brother's in the county hospital and doesn't want me. I've saved a little money, and I can sew and cook. Webb is the only

person in the world who really needs me." Her matter-of-fact tone trembled a little. "I'm going along just to stand by."

At her quiet words Marais choked and the peacock hangings, the gilt-framed pictures, and Salome's blunt figure ran together in an undistinguishable blur. She stood up abruptly.

"Tell him for me that we're all right, and that I love him—Oh, Salome—" With a rush she had thrown her arms about the woman's neck and kissed her upon the lips.

Long after she had left the little room the lovely smile that had touched Salome's face to actual beauty at her impulsive embrace, stayed with her. People said life played strange tricks, and it wasn't just a saying. Here was Salome who ought to be the comfortable mother of six shoved aside into apparent uselessness because of an ugly past. Yet, after all, perhaps she was finding herself. Setting out on a journey of protection to a man twenty years younger than herself. A middle-aged woman carrying out a harebrained scheme of youth. You might almost say in her ruin she had found her freedom.

But nothing—not even the thought that Uncle Webb wouldn't be alone—could make up for the new, tearing sensation within her as she hurried home through the darkening streets. It was as if her body and spirit were being slowly ripped apart. She would never see him again. He was gone, leaving behind him a trail of suffering and disgrace. Her golden eagle. Grandmother Haliburton had denied herself everything for him. Yet his self-indulgence hadn't led to happiness and success any more than had her sacrifice. Instead of his image,

eternally young, eternally beautiful, which had haunted her childhood and even her grown-up years, she had only the memory of his haggard face pressed against the living-room window.

After dinner while Young John shuffled his feet over a long-division problem at the dining-room table and Mrs. Plover and Marais sat reading under the sitting-room droplight, the girl laid down her book and interrupted her mother's perusal of the *Democrat* to tell her about Salome Buford. Mrs. Plover listened without comment until she had completed her recital. All she said then was, "Humph!" but Marais saw instantly that she disapproved of the course Salome had chosen. She would strip herself of her last possession to help Uncle Webb, but every line of her stiff figure and uncompromising face said that she resented bitterly another woman's doing the same thing—when that woman was Salome Buford.

"By the way, Marais," she said suddenly, in a manner that made her daughter start, "you remember we were speaking of Jim Hasler the other day. Well, Jerg Robbins was here this morning with the wood bill and he says he's dropped out of sight."

"Does Jerg Robbins know why he disappeared?" Marais voice came faintly. She had known from the moment her mother spoke she was going to spring something.

"Yes. He loved his home, and got beaten out of it. So now he's hiding away somewhere like a wounded animal."

Marais straightened her shoulders and her eyes flashed. "He wasn't beaten out of his home. Preston bought it."

Mrs. Plover folded the crackling paper neatly and laid it on the table. "Jerg says he thought so too till he saw under the transfers of title in last night's *Democrat* that the state had granted Preston Marbury a tax title deed to James Hasler's property on Fourth Street."

"I don't know what that means." The girl had difficulty in forming the words.

"Neither did I until Jerg explained it to me," returned Mrs. Plover with grim satisfaction.

Marais clasped her hands in her lap. How could she have discussed the affair with Jerg Robbins just as if he didn't already know all about Uncle Webb's dishonesty? Besides, she was convinced Preston had done nothing wrong. Hadn't he told her so out of his own mouth?

"When Jerg read the notice he went to the Hall of Records and looked over the old tax lists," Mrs. Plover went on. "He said he found that Jim had let the first installment of his taxes for two years slip. That means the property automatically goes back to the state. As soon as that young scalawag found out about Jim's carelessness, he paid the delinquent taxes on the side. The state issued him a tax title deed and the place was his."

"But how could he find out about Jim Hasler's delinquent taxes?" Marais's question was full of scornful disbelief.

"In his searching for titles, of course. When he had everything in his own hands, he went to Jim and tried to palm off some Texas mining stock on him in exchange for his place. Jim told him where to go, and he drew the deed on him."

Marais stood up, her face flaming. "It sounds to

me like a cock-and-bull story. How did Jerg Robbins know so much about it?"

"Old Jim came to him with the whole thing. He was nearly beside himself. No, Marais, every word is true as gospel. I took particular pains to find out."

At the implication of her mother's words the girl's anger burst forth. "Well, I don't believe a word of it. It's a shame for Jerg Robbins to be spreading stories about people behind their backs. That livery stable is a perfect hotbed of gossip." She walked out of the room, her head high.

In her own room she unlocked her desk where Preston's letter lay. She picked it up and went over the words unmindful of the indignant tears that blistered the pages.

He loved her—he needed her now. The appeal was in every line. If he'd done wrong—she wouldn't believe it for one moment till she heard it from his own lips—why, he needed her all the more. Women who loved men must stand by them through thick and thin. Look at the way her mother had stood by Uncle Webb. And Salome. Let the whole town turn its back on Preston, her place was beside him.

She sat down at the desk, her heart throbbing with the intense longing to shield him from her mother, Jerg Robbins, and all Oakleyville. In that exaltation of desire, as on that memorable night by the precipice she had stroked her lover's dark, bowed head, she wrote:

DEAR PRESTON: I shall be glad to go with you on Saturday to Marbury Heights.

Yours,
MARAIS.

CHAPTER IX

THE AWAKENING

MARAIS holding on to her hat with both hands, stood on the front porch Saturday afternoon looking from Preston's pale, waiting face to her mother's disapproving figure in the doorway.

"Better take your mackintosh, Marais." Mrs. Plover shivered and folded her lips tightly together as a gust of wind wrenched the wire door from her hand and banged it against the wall.

The words bristled with the disapprobation Mrs. Plover's straight back and unyielding eye had expressed ever since she learned that her daughter was going to Marbury Heights with the young man she distrusted so thoroughly. But the very opposition had hardened the girl's determination. Even if her mother's criticism was a wall between them, even if the sky hung heavy with clouds which had been rolling up from the horizon for the past two days, she was going with Preston. She hadn't been able to resist the pleading note in his letter. No, she couldn't refuse the look in his dark eyes as he waited for her at the foot of the steps—that dogged appeal so unlike his usual nonchalance. He needed her. And she needed him. Since Uncle Webb's disappearance and her encounter with Dan which showed her what a stranger he was, it seemed as if she had

nothing left but Preston. She wished everybody in Oakleyville could see her drive away with him now.

In the buggy Preston tucked the robe about her with an energy of tenderness which thrilled while it amazed her. As he gathered up the reins she stole a glance at his drawn profile. He was worried about something. She was glad—glad she had come.

A shrill whistle behind them brought the stout, gray mare to a stop, and a molasses-headed boy puffing his cheeks over his bicycle bars halted by the wheel. As Preston tore open the yellow envelope thrust at him by a grimy hand, Marais scarcely heard the urchin's triumphant "Caught up with you pretty slick, didn't I? Told me at your office you was goin' to Winters. I thought you'd take this road." She was watching Preston's face become darkly livid, so that it took on the look of a deeply creased mask. In a moment, however, he shook his shoulders as though relieving himself of a hateful burden, shoved the paper into his pocket, and, tossing the boy a quarter, flicked the mare with the whip. But he continued to remain silent, his head sunk in his coat collar while the fence posts slipped behind them and the south wind shrieked and tore at their faces like a live thing.

As they passed Fowler's Marais glanced abstractedly at the low, weather-stained house among its leafless cottonwoods and naked locust trees. The memories it evoked seemed more and more dimly remote as she and Preston drove into the flat alkali district known as Egypt, Marais wondering what had made his face change so when he read the telegram. His profile told her no more than did the brown, dead fields on either side of them. Bending

his head against the wind, he urged the mare forward along the deserted road, past an occasional tumble-down barn, the broken windows of a farmhouse whose tenants had been driven away by the profitless soil, or a pale fringe of scraggly eucalyptus trees. Now and then he looked toward the horizon where the Coast Range swam in mist and tongues of fire were followed by a warning growl of thunder.

"I'm afraid we're in for it," he muttered.

Even as he spoke long strokes of rain pinged and hung like scent on the suddenly lulled air. Then the moisture began falling in straight steadiness, and with a snap the world became so dark that Marais could scarcely see Preston's face. In the glimmering shadows it actually looked like a hollowed skull. To shake off the gruesome impression she broke the stillness.

"How long before we get there?"

"Hard to tell in this storm. In good weather the trip takes about two hours. Are you wet?" He flung his arm for a moment over her shoulder.

"No." Marais was startled by the passion of his touch. "I hope your mother and sister won't be anxious."

His answer was lost in the shrill rattle of the wind which had risen fiercer than ever, and for some time they drove on in silence.

On the outskirts of the little town of Winters, Preston stopped long enough to light the lantern hanging at the side of the buggy. Marais was glad to hold the reins and steady the lantern while he nursed a match against the wind. In the flickering light the young man turned a moment, and she was

swallowed up in the possessive fierceness of his gaze. The next instant he had swung the lantern into place and they were plowing ahead.

Visualizing the road from Winters to Marbury Heights as she remembered its red, belfried school-house and the thickening clusters of scrub oaks, the girl became conscious of their gradual ascent by the straining of the mare upon her tugs as she lifted each hoof with a muddy slobber. But the picture which persisted in her memory as they turned the wind-swept hill in a spiral of blackness was that of the old home among its trees, the lights from the long living-room through the windows, Preston's mother dreaming in the firelit room, Alicia at the door to greet them.

They came to an abrupt standstill, the wind tearing at the buggy top as though enraged at its sudden inertia.

"We're here, dearest." Preston stepped to the ground and unstrapped the lantern, but Marais caught nothing except darkness fleeing before the circling, green flare. Settling his hat more firmly on his head, he leaned toward the buggy. "I stopped at the barn first. You'd better wait in there while I unhitch. It's just a step to the house."

Wondering a little, she felt herself lifted from the buggy and carried tight against Preston's breast into the great, old barn where she stood breathless amid the drip of rain, the smell of damp hay, and of ancient leather, while he drove the mare in and began unstrapping the tugs. Finally he picked up the lantern and strode over to where she waited for him.

"Are you tired, my darling?"

She shook her head and took a step toward the door.

"Oh, no, you're not going to walk." Before she could protest he had caught her again in his arms, and was plunging through the rain and wind. Another moment and she felt solid boards beneath her feet while Preston fumbled at the front door. A limb hurling itself on the roof with terrific force sent her involuntarily closer to him.

"Come." He flung the door wide and drew her into the square hall.

"Why, it's dark. Have they gone to bed?" exclaimed Marais at his shoulder.

The gloom of the place with the lantern light flickering over the dark staircase, along the metal of the guns in the corner, and on the fierce head of the bear rug filled her with forlornness. She reached for the comforting wetness of Preston's overcoat, but he had gone into the living-room where he was striking matches.

Why didn't he answer her questions? Surely he had heard. Pressing forward on the threshold, she caught the fluttering candlelight on the empty fireplace, the shrouded chairs, the closed piano where the shadows moved noiselessly.

Her heart stopped its beating. "Preston, where are your mother and sister?"

He came toward her, his outline humping big on the ceiling. Even in her agitation Marais shudderingly recalled the old man Preston had told about, creeping in this very room upon his wife and her lover. "They're not here." His voice was so low that she could scarcely catch the words.

"Not here," she repeated. "Where are they?"

"They've—they've been called away—to San Francisco," he muttered.

She peered at him in the drafty dimness. "To San Francisco. Why—why—" she stuttered, holding her hand to her mouth to keep from screaming outright.

Preston flung his arms about her. "Marais, listen to me," he pleaded. "I didn't know they had gone to the city until after we'd left Oakleyville. That telegram told me about it. See for yourself."

With one hand he drew the yellow, crumpled paper from his pocket. But the girl did not take her eyes from his face.

"I couldn't turn back then." His voice broke. "I—wanted you—all to myself. I wanted to explain. Oh, Marais, darling——"

"You knew they were gone. And you brought me here," she whispered.

His clasp tightened passionately. "Marais—Marais, don't turn away from me. Everybody in Oakleyville is against me. When I read your note, I said, 'I knew she would stand by me.' " In the breathless hurry of his words he seemed to be talking against time.

"But Preston—" Her hands pushing him from her felt no comfort now in their contact with the rough surface of his overcoat.

"Oh, my darling, let me explain everything to you. Come," his voice exerted all its old persuasive mastery, his hands drew her with gentle force. "Come sit here by the fire——"

"The fire—but Preston, we must go." She began to tremble violently. "You must take me home."

He lifted a finger. "Listen, dearest. We can't

go out in this storm." He leaned over her as if to protect her from the cannon detonations that shook the house.

Marais's eyes flashed. With sudden realization she wrenched herself from his arms. She seemed to grow an inch taller. "We came in it." Her voice was a whip. The next moment she had slipped into the hall, but as she turned the doorknob Preston's hand closed over hers.

"That's foolish, Marais." In spite of her resistance he drew her into the living-room. She was as certainly his prisoner as though she were bound hand and foot.

The storm lulled. From a leak in the ceiling rain dripped monotonously on the floor. Suddenly Marais felt her chin beginning to tremble. "Preston, you will take me home, won't you?" She stretched out her hands. He couldn't be different. He couldn't be that stranger standing there. In her helplessness she felt the gulp of a sob in her throat. She was alone—alone except for a man who was worse than a stranger to her.

He snatched both her hands, covering them with kisses. "Dear little hands," he murmured, seizing her once more in his arms. "I've got this much of you—I'll have you all—all—" His voice sank into a whisper as he buried his face in her hair.

Marais had never been so thankful for her frightened strength as when with one climax of determination she broke from the desire of his arms, from the feeling of his hot lips on her neck.

"Oh, oh," she panted, "my mother was right, after all."

“Your mother—what did she say?” The sneer in his tone was unmistakable.

“She said” —she was commanding her tone now — “that you weren’t to be trusted.”

His laugh grated in his throat. “She has a definite way of putting things.”

“If I’d listened to her, I shouldn’t be here now.” Her voice was quite level. “But I didn’t believe it possible—that the man I was going to marry——”

“When did I ask you to marry me?” He leaned insolently against the mantelpiece.

She looked at him steadily. All at once, as if a veil had been snatched aside, she saw him for what he was. Oh, he hadn’t planned deliberately to bring her here, but the sudden opportunity had found ready acceptance in a mind fertile for evil. And she had thought freedom lay that way. She was at the end of everything, driven into a corner. But for the moment her danger was nothing to the sinking of her heart at the sight of this man stripped to his petty, warped soul. She found difficulty in speaking. “Do you think I would have let you kiss me—” A flush burned her cheeks.

His shrug broke her question. “Why be such a fool as to take a man seriously until he lays all his cards on the table?”

How like her mother’s words, “Never let a man lay the weight of his hand on you until he asks you to marry him.” She stayed silent, looking suddenly straight ahead of her toward the conservatory. Was all this driving her mad? Those were only shadows, and shadows couldn’t be audible, didn’t move that way. Yet by the piano——

He was speaking again. "We had a talk on this subject a long time ago. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Yes, I remember that talk." She knew now she must keep him talking, arguing—must fight for time—must think of some way out.

"Well, you were forewarned. If you choose to forget——"

A curious light sprang into the girl's eyes. "Wasn't that the time you said something about manipulating people?"

Preston lifted his eyebrows. "Very likely."

"Did you manipulate Jim Hasler's house away from him?"

The change in him was dreadful. He made a step toward her. Though he didn't move his arm, she had the impression that he raised it to strike her and beside the piano the shadows moved ominously to his gesture.

"So you're—you're like all the rest," he stammered. "You listen to lies behind my back instead of hearing the truth from me."

"I ask you now. What is the truth?"

"It was merely a business deal between old Hasler and me."

"What did you pay him for his place?"

The room was all at once surcharged with soundless rage which seemed to shiver and growl in the darkness.

He thrust his face close to hers, his eyes reddening dangerously. "Suppose I don't choose to tell?"

But the snarling threat of his voice, his look, his gesture were lost on Marais. Her eyes were on the ceiling. It was as if the shadow moving steadily

toward her had become the black emanation of rage quivering beyond the piano. She scarcely breathed. Suddenly her eyes were drawn to the floor. It was moving there too—a bulked mass of darkness approaching nearer and nearer——

The candles on the table flared in a random gust. They illumined two eyes staring from the darkness, red with murder, an old face distorted in mad fury, a fanged mouth agape. The same face that flashed its lowering hate at Preston from the curb in front of Jerg Robbins' stable. Old Jim Hasler's face. In his stealthily upraised hand gleamed something thin and wickedly bright.

For a second Marais's heart gave a leap as if it were going out of her. She shut her eyes tight against the words which clicked in her ear: "Let him die. He has robbed. He would have ruined you. You hate him. Keep still." Then her eyes flew open. Her mind sprang away from the temptation.

"Preston, look!" It seemed that her warning shriek would deafen the world. Yet it came a whisper from her paralyzed throat.

She sprang forward. It was too late. There was a brief struggle, the flash of steel, a groan and silence. Horror held her rigid. She couldn't see Preston. It was as if he'd been drowned. Unable to bear that black void, she raised her eyes and met the wild gaze of old Jim Hasler. A thousand devils of insanity glared in his eyes, and in his hand hung the dripping knife.

"Come," he whispered, coming toward her with his outstretched hand, "we've got to hide or they'll catch us."

He touched her.

"Oh, God, God!" Her voice was loud enough this time in her ears as she fled from the room. She snatched the still lighted lantern in the hall, flung open the front door to the blast, and dashed out into the night. Panting, head down, wading knee deep in water and mud, she fought her way to the barn. Would the fastenings of the door never give to her trembling fingers? Behind her that madman was creeping—creeping——

At last! They swung apart—and banged shut again in the grip of the wind, but she had slipped inside the barn. Mechanically she led the resisting mare from her stall, flung upon her back the harness, pulled the buggy around, and backed the animal into the shafts. Just one impulse beat in her brain—to get away from that spot. She didn't dare peer into the blackness for the figure which must be groping its way toward her. She couldn't think of that silent room where the guttering candlelight wavered on the black heap—now hiding—now revealing its shrunken lifelessness. Oh, Preston, Preston!

Once in the buggy all she could do was to give the mare her head. In the wash of the elements she had lost all idea of the road. The world was swept clean of time, of direction, of light. She drove forward, still sobbing, "Oh, oh, oh!"

Gradually, however, the sobs ceased to rack her body. The reins fell slack in her hands. She seemed to float on the crest of a roaring wave, thunder-hued. Hour after hour she lay passive while the tired mare struggled forward and the night waned.

Floating on and on into chaos. A flicker of light piercing her eyelids. They opened heavily. Was it the flare of the candles over that black heap? No, the moon was in the world. It sailed across a ragged bank clouds. Everything was quiet too. No banging of barn doors—no yelling of the wind. Blessed quiet. There were other lights. Stars? No, lights on street corners. Houses on either side of her. A sudden stop.

Marais sat up, stared at the big doorway, at the sign over it—"Stable, Garage, and Wood Yard. Jergin Robbins," at the foam-covered back of the gray mare, at the sleepy man coming from the funnel of the building. The mare had brought her straight to the stable in Oakleyville. She moved. Her body hurt as though it had been beaten. She got out of the buggy painfully, murmured good night, unmindful of the fellow's curious eyes, and started home through the quiet streets.

Tears stung her eyelids when she saw her father's tall palm spiking the sky, the mansard roof of her mother's house. "I'm going home. I'm going home." She saw something else that stopped her in her tracks, then sent her running as fast as she could make her tired body go. All the other houses up and down the street were dark as a pocket. Her mother's was lighted from top to bottom. She turned in at the front gate and ran up the steps.

Theodore, his tear-stained face puckered into a hundred wrinkles, opened the door in response to her knock. "Why, Marais," he began to cry, "you're too late. Grandma's just gone."

"Gone." Marais stumbled a little.

"Yes, her dyin' was awful suddenlike."

“Who’s that?” Mrs. Plover appeared in the hall, unusually tall against the sitting-room droplight.

When Theodore stepped aside Marais saw her mother’s face blanch to sudden terror. “Why, Marais, what is it?”

Her sharp anguish pierced even the vast hall into which the girl seemed to herself to be receding. Vast hall. What were those words she had read her class only the other day—“To-night she must inherit the vasty hall of death?”

She felt her mother’s outstretched hands.

“All gone. Grandmother—Uncle Webb—Preston—‘The vasty hall of death—’ ” The words trailed off like dissolving smoke. She staggered and fell.

PART THREE
PEOPLE (OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1911)

CHAPTER I

THIS IS FREEDOM

MARAIS lay on her living-room couch letting the smoke of her cigarette drift upward while she looked once more at the typed sheet in her hand. Her monthly pay check on the *Mirror*, with a substantial increase, and in an appended note the statement that she was to have, in addition to her duties as social editor, those of the club news. Good Peter Harnett! He had hinted as much only the week before, but she hadn't realized the advance was so near at hand.

She glanced about her at the familiar objects of her beloved room, growing dim in the fading light which sifted through the wide window—the view of which she laughingly called her million-dollar picture—at the soft brown walls and the blue rugs suggestive of the Berkeley hills back of her Virginia Street apartment and the sky sheeted in San Francisco Bay, at her three chintz-cushioned, wicker chairs, at her favorite Beatrice d'Este growing proudly indistinct with the tarnished Venetian mirror opposite her, the etching of the Golden Gate, and that print of oaks in the corner by the gate-leg table, a reminder of the best that Oakleyville had to offer.

Her fingers involuntarily touched the check. She would be able now to buy that piece of gold and

maroon embroidery she and A. B. the Pup had seen the other day when they were in San Francisco on a news lead. It would go beautifully just over her table. Oh, this raise was going to mean a number of things. She could send more money home to help her mother with the household expenses and mortgage. Now since Young John was shooting into a big boy, even with the neat, weekly sum he made selling *The Saturday Evening Post*, even with the roomers and the baking Mrs. Plover did for Hay Spinkham's new delicatessen, every cent counted. She could indulge herself in that chubby, capacious teapot she'd seen recently in a Japanese store on Shattuck Avenue. It would be big enough to hold tea for the crowd on the Sunday afternoons the boys from the *Mirror* office and Dan happened in at the same time. What a sense of power to feel that her work on Peter Harnett's paper—the sheet on which John Wentworth had suggested that Uncle Webb get a position—gave her the freedom to live where she chose, the right to select her pictures and her friends without shrinking from the uplifted finger and disapproving glance of her mother. Perhaps she had shirked her duty in turning her back on Oakleyville, the high school, and her home two years ago, leaving her mother to run the house and bring up Young John alone. But with all her self-questionings she had never been sorry she'd made the break, not with all the comradeship, the fun, the days and nights of work at the office, the freedom she had gained.

She sat up, stretched wide her arms, and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror at the foot of the couch. Even the jealous dusk couldn't hide the star-riness of her eyes, the rumpled, lustrous waves of

her hair, the grace of her shoulders in the blue and white coolie coat she had slipped on when she had come in from the office.

Could this be the same girl who had fallen across her mother's threshold the night of the dreadful ride home from the old house in the hills? The same one who had lain for weeks as in a trance, learning with heavy, unopened eyelids that Preston Marbury was not dead, but merely suffering from a flesh wound from old Jim Hasler's knife? From that night Preston as a person had made no further impressions upon her. She had been unmoved when, after his recovery, he had left for the East without sending her a word of contrition or farewell. The fact that the whole town knew a farm hand had discovered old Jim in a ditch with a broken hip the next morning after his attack on the young man, and that, quite crazed, he had been placed in the Napa Insane Asylum, that Preston's law office was closed and that Marais was silently but significantly connected with these details—facts sorely borne by Mrs. Plover—made apparently small impression upon the girl. She recalled now how far away and trivial they had seemed to her as she had stared idly at her useless hands as pale as the counterpane against which they rested.

It was only during her slow convalescence when her mother had come one day to the bedside and said quietly, "Marais, Miss Merkeley, the substitute, is here and wants to know when you'll be able to take up your work at the high school. She's got to shape her own plans. Shall I say you'll be there in another month?" that like a coating of ice the inertia had broken within the girl. She had pulled herself up-

right with sudden energy, saying, "I'm not going to teach in Oakleyville any more." With the strained tiredness of her mother's face bending over her, the haunting burden of the mortgage, and no other position open, she wondered even now that she'd had the resolution to say, "I'm not going to teach here any more." From that moment the ticking which had beaten in her head ever since she had sunk unconscious on the threshold of her home, stopped. She had slept quietly and the next morning when Mrs. Plover entered the room with her breakfast, she was standing in the middle of the floor dressed. "Yes," she had answered her mother's startled exclamation, "I'm better, and I'm going over to see Mr. Wentworth before he leaves for the bank." It was thus that she had gained her position on the *Mirror*, and had found herself a new home, a new environment, new friends, new work, a new world quite different from that old, dark, narrow life which was gone forever.

A decided rough-and-ready knock thumped her reflections into silence. With a murmured, "Now who's that?" she switched on the lights, and swung the door open to a big, young man who blinked in the yellow flood, and then strode into the living-room.

"Hello, Marais, thought I'd come up and see how the world looks from the top of Virginia Street. It has to be done once in so often." He shook a heavy lock of black hair out of his eyes and his smile melted the ruggedness of his mouth.

She smiled back at him serenely. "I'm glad you came, Dan, but you can't stay long. I've got to

cover that pageant at the Greek Theater, and it's now," she bent to her wrist watch, "seven-thirty."

"I'll go with you unless some one else is ahead of me." Dan thrust his hands in his pockets and walked, whistling, to the window. "Want to go out for dinner first?"

"No, I had something earlier. There's meat in the cooler if you want to make yourself a sandwich while I put on my things." Marais disappeared in her dressing-room from whence she heard between snatches of "Alabama Coon" Dan's words, "I'm not hungry. Let's eat later."

She smiled as she settled the smart, little hat over her bright hair, in spite of Dan's interruption still caught by the threads of her earlier reflections. Rather different, her unemotional greeting of him, from the tremulous joy she couldn't keep out of her voice in his presence in the old days. The clearest proof that she had been born anew was her cool detachment when he had appeared one day at her apartment and asked bluntly, his hands moving a little, if they couldn't be friends. As she had looked into his wistful, dogged eyes, the dragnet of the past had caught her heart in its washing burden of sweetness and humiliation. The next moment she had faced him, clear-eyed and steady. "Why not?" she had shrugged. But when he had attempted to explain stammeringly his abrupt departure that sunny morning so long ago, she had interrupted him with decision. "Oh, Dan, we were just kids then. Let's not go into that. Everything's so different now." And on that understanding—of the past as of no consequence, and the present a give-and-take of comradeship—for the past year they had tramped the

Berkeley hills together, gone to the theater, cooked suppers in Marais's kitchenette, and argued about feminism with always on her part that cool touch of "Take it or leave it as you please," and on his the double watchfulness of one who checks himself from intruding and waits in stubborn patience for a certain locked door to swing open.

At the Greek Theater where eucalyptus trees above the stone portico of the softly glowing stage plumed delicately black against the brilliance of stars, Marais led the way to the top row of seats against the cement wall. There she and Dan settled themselves on the steamer rug he had brought, she produced her pad and pencil, and when the royal purple curtains slid apart revealing girl figures weaving a gracious round of dewy morning before a king in leopard skins, she began to jot down vagrant impressions. But the pageant's rhythm lights of amber, rose, crimson, and clearest blue, its stately utterances of snares laid for white innocence, its triumphs of battle-worn heroes, recorded themselves only upon that part of her practiced mind busy with her criticism for to-morrow's *Mirror*. She was conscious of a certain restfulness in sitting high above the rows of dim heads with the music of voices and instruments floating through the quiet air, encircling her and Dan in a woven isolation of melody. Dan was a comforting soul. He didn't interrupt when she was writing, and even when she sat doing nothing, seemed to catch her wish to be quiet. Yes, he was a most understanding friend in their new, unemotional relationship.

Once, however, as her pencil was flying across the page under the impetus of a sudden idea, he leaned

over to whisper, "I don't see how you get down your impressions. I feel them inside of me, but I couldn't any more write them than—than——"

"Than I could build a bridge across the Amazon," she flashed, and could immediately have bitten her tongue for her rash dip into the past. "I suppose it's because I like to do it. I'd almost rather write up a play than be in one," she ran on, and recalled as from another world the Parnassus College performance of "The Merchant of Venice." How different life was now that she had escaped that repressed girlhood into a reasonable freedom! Even Sydney who had preached philippics against Oakleyville's narrowness and her wasted, emotional self, would approve of her present system of living. Well, Sydney's brown velvet eyes would soon be weighing her and her freedom.

"Did you know Sydney's coming from New York almost any day now?" Her thoughts became articulate as the purple clouds rolled together on the forest of glittering swords at the climax of the second act.

Dan shook back the bothersome blob of hair from his questioning eyes. "Sydney?" he repeated as though the name was unfamiliar to his ears. "Oh, yes, Sydney Dalrymple."

"Not Sydney Dalrymple any more," smiled Marais. "She's married."

"Well, she didn't live up to her principles, did she? As I remember, she used to swear she'd never marry."

"Quent Waynor evidently helped her to change her mind. She's quite mad about him. Her letters are full of him and his work."

“What does he do?”

“He’s an artist. Successful. New commissions all the time, Sydney says. They have a fascinating studio where they give chaffing-dish suppers to half the interesting people in New York, it seems to me. Sydney’s letters are so full of pep that I go ’round like a charged battery for days after I get one.”

In a moment Dan broke the silence. “I know you two are great friends, but somehow I’m not sure about Sydney Dalrymple. Funny, but that’ll always be her name to me. She’s a kind of a fly-up-the-creek. The last time I saw her she talked to me for an hour about living one’s own life until you’d have thought she was somebody’s bonds slave. I’ll bet her husband’s got his hands full.”

“Dan, you’re a barbarian,” Marais interrupted him warmly. “You’d like to have women do nothing but stay at home and sew and wash and keep the house clean. That’s medieval. Just because Sydney lives in New York and has a real life, you’re prejudiced. I pity your wife.”

His gaze deepened as it rested upon her. “My wife—” he began stubbornly.

But Marais had turned her back on him and was already chatting briskly with two young men who had stopped in the aisle beside the pair.

“Marais, you going to lose me my new cigarette holder?” While he spoke the taller of the two, a thin youth with rapier eyes and flaming hair, laid a firm hand over his companion’s mouth from which issued mumbled protests. “I just bet A. B. the Pup that you wouldn’t invite us to supper. And his remarks in case you don’t had to be strangled at their birth.”

Marais looked from one to the other. "Don't I see enough of you two at the office?" At their dejection her eyes twinkled. "Well, you can come on three conditions. If Dan'll cream the shrimps, Jimmie'll make the coffee, A. B. the sandwiches, and you will all leave me alone while I get this stuff in shape for to-morrow."

Once more she lay on her couch, the lights out, her eyes turned dreamily toward her million-dollar picture, now a black curtain studded with glittering fireflies. But superimposed upon it was the vision which she delighted to conjure up—Dan, his big shoulders crowded into one of her bungalow aprons, watching with his blackest frown the gently simmering dish on the stove, A. B. the Pup surreptitiously sucking sugar while he spread the cheese sandwiches, and Jimmie waving an eggshell in one hand and the coffee spoon in the other as he gave his nightly dissertation on how the Chief—the name by which Peter Harnett went among his staff—ought to run the *Mirror*. Marais at her typewriter gradually had become aware that he was speaking with more emphasis than usual. "If he supports that damned municipal railway issue that's coming up at the next town election, you couldn't sell the *Mirror* for junk."

"But isn't it the only thing to stand for in decency?" Dan had looked up long enough to ask.

Jimmie had cut the air savagely with his knife. "Yes, if you want to set the vested interest of this mug-wump by the ears. God, you're like all the rest! Don't you realize that we live by advertisements alone?"

She had broken in at that. "Have you talked to the Chief, Jimmie?"

"Try it and see if you can make a dent in him," had been his grim retort. "I tell you the hide of the rhino is nothing to the skin of a good man and a reformer. No, sir, the *Mirror's* doomed."

"Don't say that, Jimmie." Marais's brusque command had ended on a sob that she vainly tried to drown by a sudden rattling scale on the typewriter.

After the boys had gone Dan had lingered a moment in the doorway. "I didn't realize you thought so much of the *Mirror*, Marais," he had said awkwardly.

"Work on a newspaper for a while and you'll understand how it gets in your blood," she returned bluntly. "I think it would kill me to see it go under."

"Harnett won't let it fail," he comforted her.

"Oh, I don't know about that. You heard what Jimmie said. When the Chief gets an idea in his head, he's like Gibraltar," had been her disconsolate reply.

"Well," Dan had brightened up, "come what will, you've had your training in writing. You know you've got that novel to write."

She had shrugged off his reminder with a sarcastic, "That won't buy me bread and butter in the meantime," but as she lay there now, thinking of his words, she wished he'd keep that dumb wishfulness out of his eyes. It stirred the embers of something in her heart which she congratulated herself was dead. She wished the Chief had enough money to finance the paper without calling on John Went-

worth—how she hated the smirch of his senile touch—for help. But in spite of such wishes she was happy as she lay on her couch and gazed through the window where the bay fog had smudged out the lights of Berkeley and San Francisco. She knew that beneath its obscuring blanket lay the fairy land of soft gloom and radiance, just as subconsciously she was aware that her face with its clearer lines, its added color and sparkle, its joy reflected in the golden lights in her eyes and her frequently smiling mouth, lay invisible in the depths of the dark mirror before her, and that to-morrow held in its promise fresh, unexpected angles of contact at the office, that a succession of such to-morrows stretched before her. At the prospect, weary as she was, the surge of exuberant vitality flooded her from head to foot. Work, friends, her life to make as she pleased—that was freedom!

CHAPTER II

SYDNEY IS CONSISTENT

THE next morning Marais swung her way down the Virginia Street hill in the bright October sharpness which cut out Goat Island a darker blue against the shining waters of the bay. She often walked thus; glimpses of the Berkeley hills—patient elephant's back, she called them—the white finger of the university campanile piercing the clustered, polished foliage of the campus, the tiny houses on the hills of San Francisco winking in the morning sun, all accompaniments to her busy thoughts racing ahead to the *Mirror* plant in the low, brown building at the very gates of the university. As she was clearing her desk of clippings, wondering, as she always did, what the newspaper adventures of this day were to be, Jimmie banged into the editorial office, waving an advertising layout in a white circle about his head with a whoop of joy.

"Cut out the rough stuff," growled A. B. the Pup, throwing back his raven pompadour and hunching lower over his typewriter. "Chief wants a rehash of the mayor's report by the time he gets back from Frisco. How in hell'm I going to do it if you war-whoop all over the place?"

"Who wouldn't crow when Linforth's just fallen for a full-page ad?"

A. B. the Pup whirled to his feet. "You don't

say. Good work, old man." He slapped Jimmie's back while Marais banged the table till the paste pot jumped.

Linforth, the powerful, long-faced owner of the biggest department store in the college town, had from the beginning of Jimmie's advances evaded his every wile as a clever advertising man. For him to have come in with so much space was a signal triumph. Marais had a particularly warm spot for Jimmie. He it was who had discovered her first report of a faculty dinner which she had placed on the Chief's desk for his inspection. A quizzical spark had fired his keen eye. "Too highbrow," was his answer to her humble "I know it's rotten." "Take it to A. B. the Pup. He'd like nothing better than to show you a sample of his stuff." Jimmie, cynically self-made, could never resist a shaft of sarcasm at the A. B. the Pup's college training. His suggestion had proved a wise one. Every morning after she went to the young reporter for help, she found on her desk a blue-penciled copy of the *Mirror* of the preceding day over which she pored, appalled by her mistakes irreclaimably printed and sent broadcast over Berkeley. And she learned so swiftly that newspaper language and English as taught in high-school classes are different tongues, and was so willing to listen to words of journalistic wisdom that she won the unchanging loyalty of both her teacher and Jimmie.

"Jimmie, that's great. Won't the Chief be glad?" Marais grasped both his hands and shook them vigorously up and down with each word.

"I'm not so sure. You know his feeling about Linforth and the rest of the conservatives." With

an attempt at indifference Jimmie disappeared in a closet in the corner of the room, emerging in a moment with a fedora ornamented by a black band replacing the sober, brown derby which had covered his red head. Settling it at a rakish angle, he shot out, whistling a knife edge of tune. When he wore the fedora it was a sure sign he was pleased. The *Mirror* had made a scoop over the *Journal*, the rich, reactionary, morning paper trying to crush it in its fight for existence—a big scoop. Marais smiled at his transparency as she settled herself again to work.

In a moment, however, he poked his head in the door long enough to say, "Some swells out here in their limousine. Inquiring for the Chief and you, Marais. I couldn't head 'em off. They're comin' in," and snapped off again, a hungry dog on the scent for advertising prey.

Marais looked up, frowning. But the line between her level brows melted in the smile which ran like water from her lips to her eyes as she watched the callers enter the door. She rose, her gaze turning expectantly from the carefully dressed old man to the middle-aged woman with haunted eyes beneath loops of auburn hair streaked with gray. Her unspoken question was answered by the sudden appearance of another figure between the two. In the quick blur over her eyes John Wentworth's shriveled face and his daughters' tremulous mouth quivered together and were blotted out by the radiant vision, all furs and golden ringlets and stormily sparkling eyes. Sydney!

Marais ran to her friend, held her in her arms for a long moment, thrust her off, the better to see

whether her marriage had made the difference one always expected in Sydney. But her scrutiny, continued while she learned that Sydney had arrived the night before and couldn't wait another minute to see Marais, revealed only what it always did after her extended absences, that everybody and everything faded in comparison with her restless vividness.

"Grandfather wanted to see this Mr. Harnett, or whatever his name is. And mother has to look up some poor relatives." She finished her explanation with a final bear hug of Marais. "I mean other poor relatives besides us." Her short lip curled as she tossed the last remark in her grandfather's surly face.

"Sydney." The sharpness of Mrs. Dalrymple's tone focused Marais's attention on her anxious, frightened eyes. The fear in her voice was the most definite note Sydney's mother had ever struck in the girl's consciousness. She had always seemed wound about in a veil of kindly vagueness which obscured her expression, deadened the gray of her eye, muffled her personality. But some panic had stripped off the wrappings, exposing her haggardly face to face with its starkness. Could it be possible that Sydney wasn't aware of this change in her mother? Her reassuring whisper which Marais caught, "Never mind, dear, a little teasing won't do him any harm," her hand upon her mother's twitching sleeve, seemed gentler than her former careless arrogance toward Mrs. Dalrymple.

John Wentworth turned abruptly to Marais, his eyes red with anger. "This young woman thinks I'm made of money, Marais. First it's a trip to

Europe; then a year in New York. When she married you'd think the demands would be over. But bless your life, Quent's got to have a studio. By God, husbands supported their wives when I was young! And now she walks in and presents me with a bill for a thousand dollar fur coat. How she thinks I'm going to pay for such fiddle-faddle when the dry year is killing off the crops and the cattle is more than I know. Why don't you amount to something, like Marais here?" The old man paused, breathing hard, the veins bulging in his shrunken temples.

Sydney's satin-shot foot had begun a hurried tattoo on the bare floor. Marais was conscious that A. B. the Pup, sensing a family row, had sneaked into the circulation room.

"Because I'm no good," Sydney burst out. "You've done nothing but hold up my iniquities ever since I stepped off the ferryboat last night. I'm sick and tired of it. If you don't like the way I do, grandfather——"

Marais caught sight of Mrs. Dalrymple's ashen lips. "You'll have to admit that the coat is awfully becoming to her, Mr. Wentworth," she said quickly. "That shade just matches her eyes. If she was my granddaughter, I'd be so proud I couldn't contain myself."

Her subterfuge worked. John Wentworth's eyes ran over his granddaughter, swathed in the mink, and calming beneath his slowly rising approval, Sydney lifted her arms and turned about for his inspection.

"I thought you'd like to have me look well when I came home for the first time. And it was such a

bargain," she murmured, smiling up at him from under her long lashes.

Ridiculous, thought Marais, how he melted beneath her coquetry. If Sydney only kept her temper and didn't grow reckless, she could always manage him. No matter how angry he became at her wildness and her extravagance, that appeal to his vanity invariably reduced him to order. She had never been afraid of his explosions. In the end she had always done with him as she wanted. And she always would. One could tell that by the confident tilt of her golden head in its dashing French turban.

He patted her shoulder with the pride of ownership. "Pretty fine girl, after all. But don't try to put anything over on me again, missy," he remarked, chucking her under the chin. "You know I won't stand for everything. Here comes Harnett." Marais glimpsed the Chief's dour, brown face in the doorway. "I want to see him. You women'll have plenty to talk about without me."

But it was not until Sydney had driven her mother up to North Berkeley to visit her crabbed, Great-aunt Deborah, not until Marais had with only half her thoughts upon it, shoved her copy into the linotype room just a second before the dead line, and the two were alone in the apartment on Virginia Street, that they had their first real visit. Before she could settle herself, Sydney must dart here and there with oh's and ah's of approval for the completeness of the kitchenette's equipment and a sigh of æsthetic satisfaction at the panorama of sea and sky and islanded mountains from the window. Finally, however, they faced one another cross-legged on the couch while Sydney, lighting many perfumed

cigarettes from her own jeweled match box, ran like mercury from one subject to another. If her whirlwind days were past, from her talk Marais found that she was still hurtling through life, breathless sponsor of new ideas, dynamic supporter of strange enthusiasms, streaming sympathy upon persecuted friends, battering at their medieval prejudices, singing pæans for their success against reactionary forces. What power did she possess to make one's existence seem drab and pointless in contrast to the sustained brilliance of her own atmosphere? Marais, finding the answer to that question only in the vague likeness she sometimes sensed between her Uncle Webb and Sydney, a struggle in both of them to oppose restraint, the ability that each had to send her pulses bounding faster, was interrupted by her friend's inquiring look into her absorbed face and her sudden question, "Well, what's the verdict? Have I changed?"

Marais shook her head slowly, drawing back to gain a clearer perspective of the sparkling countenance. "Not much." Yet—there was a difference in Sydney, a softer light in the bronze eyes, a tenderness molding the corners of the mouth which had always been so mutinous, more graciously rounded contours of the supple body.

Then a cloud quenched the light in Marais's face. "But, Syd, what's the matter with your mother? I never saw her look like that before. Is she sick?"

Sydney's answer clipped her friend's last words. "There's nothing the matter. She gets tired out. You know how mother fusses over nothing. But Marais, tell me about the *Mirror*. From what I gather it's the most progressive paper in California.

Gotten a little freer yourself, old dear." Sydney glanced at the cigarette in Marais's fingers and rumbled her friend's loose, burnished hair. "Well, it's all to the good."

"We can talk about the *Mirror* any time." All at once Marais was jealous of sharing even with Sydney a glimpse of her magic domain, almost superstitious that it would vanish, leaving her painfully awake in the old, arid life of Oakleyville. "I want to hear about Quent."

Sydney blew three delicately perfect rings of smoke toward the Venetian mirror before she replied, "What shall I tell you about him? He's a love of a boy and we get on famously together. What more does one want?"

"Nothing, of course." Marais was sorry for the vague disappointment she couldn't keep out of her voice. Sydney would surely catch it.

She did, straightening up with a gesture of impatience. "Quent and I are no romanticists, Marais. Each has his work and respects the other's liberty. That's all there is to it."

"I suppose that was the only condition upon which you'd marry him."

Sydney shrugged slightly. "Isn't that the only basis on which any really modern couple marries?"

But when Marais had made tea and the two were eating toasted English muffins and marmalade in the fading, rosy light, she forgot her irritation in describing to Marais the top floor of the old New York house in which she and Quent lived, its immense studio living-room, its two dressing-rooms, and the kitchen, "a real kitchen with brick floor, buff walls, and Delft blue hangings. Quent designed the whole

thing. It's a duck of a place to cook in," finished Sydney.

"It must be fascinating," murmured Marais, recalling uncomfortably John Wentworth's sarcastic remark about the upkeep of Sydney's Eastern home. "But you don't do the cooking?"

"Why not?" Sydney, having achieved an effect, paused to enjoy it. "It brings you in closer touch with your friends than anything you can do. Gil Sommer-in-dyke, my novel-writing friend, is mad about a ragout I make for him. He swears he can write all night without a break after he has eaten it. Berta Holmes who sings insists that my coffee clears her voice like nothing else in the world. And a Unitarian minister we know came every Sunday night last winter before church to eat ham cooked in cloves and mint. Otherwise he said his sermon was always a failure."

"But doesn't that make an enormous amount of work?"

"It would except that our friends are such awfully good sports to help. Besides, there are a few dishes they like simultaneously. It's wonderful, Marais—our life. Sometimes we sit at the table the whole night listening to Gil read his last manuscript, or to some mad poet spout free verse or to Berta improvising between her songs."

Marais thought of her drowsiness if she stayed up till after midnight. "Don't you get sleepy?"

"Once in a while. In that case the person smitten slides into my bed or Quent's and takes a nap." Her eyes sparkled wickedly. "They've been known to pile in three at a time." She returned Marais's unguarded stare with a tweak of her ear. "You'd

soon get used to our ways, dearest. You wouldn't even be shocked if I told you that Gil Sommer-indyke who stayed with us for a month used to come to my room after he'd been out for the evening and sit on my bed and tell me all the gossip."

Marais was absorbed in the pattern of the coverlit Grandmother Haliburton had woven in her youth. "What did Quent say to these talks?" she asked.

Sydney sat upright. "Quent—what business—" She broke off, laughing. "Why, sometimes he got up and joined us. But he's such a sleepyhead that for the most part he slept right through our powwows. Oh, Gil and I've had such fun, Marais."

She looked bewitching as she tucked herself more comfortably on the couch, a lovely, roguish boy. But Marais's face remained stiffly inflexible in spite of her efforts to smile spontaneously.

"Wait till you meet some of my friends," Sydney ran on gayly. "Gil and Berta are in Los Angeles now. They're coming to visit me in a week or two. Then we'll have some interesting parties."

"That'll be jolly." Marais hated herself for her automaton's voice.

Sydney leaned forward, looking intently into her eyes. Suddenly her eyes darkened, and she began to tremble. "You're sitting there silently condemning me," she exclaimed with low vehemence.

Marais opened her mouth, but Sydney rushed on: "You who've never had a real experience—you pretend to judge. Oakleyville's your standard. I know. You've never let yourself see life as it is. And you condemn those of us who are making a strike for freedom. You—you're a pharisee."

Her fierce scorn whipped Marais into her custom-

ary courage. "You've no right to say that, Sydney." She looked straight into her friend's blazing eyes. "You haven't stood on your own convictions very firmly."

"What do you mean?" demanded Sydney.

"Didn't you marry Quent?"

Sydney lifted her head and looked at her levelly.

"No," she said distinctly, "I didn't."

CHAPTER III

BUILDING THE PYRAMIDS

ON SATURDAY, a brilliant, sketchy day of north wind which cleared the sky of every vestige of cloud and filled the air with an indescribable tingle, Marais and Dan took a tramp in the Berkeley hills with the idea of cooking their supper in one of the rock-sheltered spots near the top of Grizzly Peak. When Dan had suggested going, Marais had met him with a quick consent. Nothing filled her with greater exhilaration than to swing along the trail in rhythm with Dan's competent stride, past the hillside where gangs of men and horses were at work excavating for the great football stadium, up the leafy walk abutting on Coed Canyon to the point where rounded, foliaged peaks began to cut the sky irregularly. It increased her sense of power to grip her heels in the side of the cliff, slippery with dried grass, pull herself up, hand over hand, disdaining Dan's help, and, pausing for breath, to find that half a dozen steps had won her a dizzy place in the sky. The panorama below, stretching from the tower of Oakland's City Hall on the far south to the fairy-island shores about Richmond on the north, with San Francisco's peopled hills almost at arm's distance beyond the bay, whether misted in rosy, sunset light, or obscured by broken clouds, or distinct in flawless sunshine, possessed her by a flying rapture.

But to-day as they rounded the last unsheltered shoulder of Grizzly, Marais was unconscious of the purpling hills encircling them, of the crimson bay beneath the setting sun whose lurid disk was barred by bands of fog whipping up from the Golden Gate. Her thoughts were milling about with the revelation Sydney had made the previous afternoon. Sydney was living with Quent Waynor unmarried to him. Many of her friends had tried the same experiment and found it successful. Their lives seemed the center of much gayety and real work. While Sydney was in California Quent was using the studio of their apartment as a modeling room where he and a group of his friends were studying sculpture under Sonia Merovitsch, a Russian whose work was causing a furor in New York.

"Quent's crazy about her," Sydney had said, "undulating walk, Slavic calm, and all that sort of thing. I told him by all means to amuse himself while I'm away."

"You mean—" Marais's words had come faintly, "you mean you suggested to Quent that he—he——"

Sydney had helped her out lightly. "Why shouldn't Quent divert himself? I enjoy any one who intrigues me. My nature's big enough for a dozen friendships and Quent too. And he knows it."

What an insolent figure of beauty she had made as she lay back among the cushions watching through her curling lashes the effect of her words upon Marais, uncomfortably aware of her scrutiny.

"But aren't you afraid you'll lose Quent?" she had finally asked.

"If I lose him so easily, I never had him," Sydney

had shrugged. "Besides, there isn't much danger. He adores my cooking."

Marais had heard the clock in Bacon Hall on the campus toll its sonorous note every hour that night. As she turned restlessly from side to side in her hot bed, not only the fragments of this conversation floated through her mind, but also certain other phrases wrung reluctantly from Sydney by her questioning. "No, I didn't tell grandfather. Why disturb the older generation? He doesn't understand our ways. Yes, mother knows. I let it out inadvertently. And of course she nearly went crazy." So that was the reason for Mrs. Dalrymple's gray fear. She was afraid of her father's fury, stood a shrinking, ineffectual wall between her daughter and John Wentworth's possible discovery. Recalling her wavering, terror-stricken eyes, Marais had kept saying to herself, "Why didn't Sydney keep it from her? She was careful enough not to let the old man know."

As she swung along behind Dan, her short skirt brushing the clumps of mesquite on either side of the trail, the wet smell of rising fog in her nostrils, she wished she had some understanding person with whom she could talk over the problem, some one who knew how she loved Sydney, how she despised the narrow, Oakleyville standards, and yet who realized without any halting explanation from her the shock Sydney's words had given her. But when she looked at Dan's powerful shoulders and rugged profile against the quiet mauve and rose-colored sky, when she remembered snatches of his careless remark about Sydney at the Greek Theater, she wasn't able to open her lips on the subject. Dan

had never given Sydney her proper valuation. Her news would only confirm him in his prejudice.

She might have been spared her struggle. Before they had climbed another quarter of a mile, Dan had thrown her over his shoulder, "I caught a glimpse of your friend Sydney and her mother on the ferryboat yesterday. Seen her yet?"

In his preoccupation he did not notice the indistinctness of Marais's assent. He went on: "What's her latest scheme for freedom? New York ought to be the breeder of many."

This was the moment to tell him Sydney's most recent gesture of liberty. She could see the rigid set of his jaw breaking the rough sweetness of his mouth, the lowered curtain of his eyes at her disclosure. With Dan black was black, white, white. His knowledge of the distinction between gray, lavender, and purple defined itself less clearly. If he lacked one quality which Marais could have wished for him, it was a more subtle sense of values. Dan's principles, his ideas, his politics, his taste in books grew more entrenched, as time hardened the elasticity of his youth into manhood's oaken durability. No, it was unfair to subject Sydney to the unconscious rigidity of his standard. He'd be terribly hard on her. And the worst of it was she'd be forced to acknowledge the justice of his criticism even while she resented his blindness to the demands of Sydney's nature.

Dan's blunt words broke into her reflection. "What's the matter with her mother? I never saw any one look so badly. Is she sick?"

"Sydney says she spends her life worrying." Marais bit her lip over the reluctant words.

Dan whistled a bar of "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground." "Well, Sydney'd better watch out for her health or she won't have any mother. Her face has haunted me ever since I saw her."

They walked on in silence. Dan interrupted it again. "Your mother's never been to Berkeley, has she, Marais?"

It seemed to the girl that she was answering in nothing but negative monosyllables.

"I've got a scheme." The brisk walk, the sharpness of the air through which the fog was filtering more thickly, had loosened his usually inarticulate tongue. "The next time I drive to Oakleyville I'm going to bring her back with me. And we'll show her a time." He took off his cap, the sudden movement sending the unruly lock of black hair tumbling over his eyes in an absurdly boyish fashion. "Your mother and I've been friends ever since the Sunday she dressed me down for taking you to Fowler's. Remember? I admire her a lot. What do you think of the plan, Marais?"

"Fine." Her cheeks burned at the false enthusiasm of her tone.

Her mother in Berkeley! Just when she was beginning to find an escape from the memory of the uplifted finger and stern judge's eyes, Dan suggested that her mother come into this new life, look with compressed lips and eyes askance at her relationship with Jimmie and A. B. the Pup, at her living alone in the apartment, at her smoking with the boys in the office when they worked on an extra night shift, at her whole scheme of existence. It couldn't be.

"We'll have to arrange it." She flinched again

at her mechanical words and looked about for some means of escape.

The path lay straight ahead, level as a floor against the abrupt uprising of Grizzly's mist-wreathed slope. Her eyes brightened, her voice rang out, "Race you to the big rock, Dan," and she flashed by him, her arms outspread like the wings of a bird.

The wind beat against her body with strong fingers to pull her back. A bough struck her smartly across the cheek so that its impression stayed a hot, green mark in her mind. But in her swift decision to run the drag on her spirit was released. As trees, rocks, shrubs, floating ribbons of fog rushed by her, she knew she was harnessed to an impulse stronger than the urge to win over Dan. She was fleeing from the rigidity of her mother, the dark dream of Grandmother Haliburton, from the failure of Uncle Webb, her brief folly with Preston Marbury, from Oakleyville's dead flatness into the highlands of laughter and work. The goal, the rock she and Dan both knew, lay just around the curve. The earth underfoot gave out a strong, vital odor. From a bay tree a frightened bird fluttered and whirred on mounting wing. She sped along the path more and more fleetly, her body moving amazingly strong and fresh, exulting in certain victory over circumstances, over Dan. She was outrunning him. His footsteps, which for a time had pressed hard behind her, had died away. Once he shouted, but at his voice her feet had flown faster. Now only the rushing wind struck her ears. She was alone, had outdistanced the ugly, vague problems yapping at her heels, was skimming the clouds of triumph.

She beheld just ahead the sharp curve in the trail

above the steep, rocky ravine. What happened when she turned its bend was swifter than the exuberant thoughts whirling in her mind. Her flying feet halted a second by the dark figure plunging down the cliff side upon her—her startled stumble over a slither of stones across the path—the tottering of her body toward the precipice—her wild clutching of the air—a shout—the darting leap of some one to her side—the sudden security of strong arms about her—Dan's eyes pouring an unshuttered look of love and fear upon her—his voice in her ear, "God, Marais, that was a close call! I thought you heard me shout that I was going to try it by the cliff."

Breathless, dazed by her sharp succession of emotions, she leaned against him a moment, the thudding of her heart mingling with his. The strength of his support fused in her trembling body a kind of glow. Ecstasy streamed through her with the swiftness of light.

Then across Dan's shoulder she caught sight of a man pushing through the rusty, ever thickening fog, beheld as in a trance the dark, brooding face hunched between his shoulders, the walking staff which kept steady pace with the high-laced boots. Almost before he had fully emerged she had pulled herself from Dan's clasp and was calling with breathless gayety, "Hello, Mr. Harnett, what do you think of anybody who leaps over a mountain in two jumps to win a race?"

"I should say he'd accepted a pretty high handicap." Harnett's reply, in his peculiar, high-pitched voice, indicated no surprise at the encounter.

"Well I'm glad you happened along to teach him the rules of sportsmanship."

In the explanation and argument which followed Marais recovered her poise and in measure her exhilaration. She liked Peter Harnett, liked and admired him in spite of the clamp the stoic repression of his life placed upon her spirit. From the day she had come to work on the *Mirror* her interest had gone out to the quiet man whose tireless fight to put his paper over the top as an independent sheet had fired her with the constant desire to serve him and his cause. She liked his habit, whenever he had a problem to "think through" as he called it, of returning to his linotype at which he had sat many years before he became an employing printer and editor. She liked his confidence in her, proved by the talks they had in the afternoons after the paper was out, sitting in the composing room so late that the dusk turned the long tables loaded with trays of type into shapeless masses of black and blotted out the Chief's pug nose and satyr eyes. And the mystery which shrouded his personal life piqued her imagination; the floating stories of his early, wild years at sea, his unhappy marriage interrupted by a disfiguring accident to his beautiful wife when she was running away with her lover, his care of the strong, gnarled invalid she had become. For a long time she had wanted her two friends, whose acquaintance had hitherto been of the most casual sort to meet in just such an environment. Peter Harnett, finely wrought, the tenacity of his wiry frame contradicted by the eternal question in his slanting eyes, Dan cast in a hardier mold, his stern jaw and unruly hair bespeaking the aggressiveness of youth and nature—they would never attack problems in the same

fashion, but their straight standards might eventually lead them to many similar conclusions.

Nothing was ever worked out more neatly by a toward fate. At the united importunities of the two Peter Harnett consented to eat with them. Dan's fire was perfect, the chops cooked to a juicy turn, the aroma of the coffee inescapably inviting. After supper the three smoked on a covered shelf of rock, folded in a cozy intimacy by the swirling blankets of fog, faded to a thick, grayish black since it was no longer shot through and through by the sunset glow. And by the happiest twist of all Dan and the Chief fell into a discussion of newspaper methods, Dan putting his questions each with a short, business bark, Harnett answering more deliberately but with equal brevity. Just as she had many times desired.

And yet, while she listened to their brusque voices, she was hearing again the throb of Dan's deep tone in her ear. Although she purposely watched the glow from the Chief's pipe light up his blunt features, in her mind's eye she was seeing only Dan's uncovered, devouring gaze as she stood against him, the swell of her heart under his shoulder.

With a determined shaking of herself together, she blew a ring of smoke into the larger wreaths of still incoming fog, and forced her unwilling attention to the talk being passed across her person.

"But just why are you taking up the fight for the municipal ownership of Berkeley's street-car system?" Dan was asking.

"The issue's good stuff. Just the kind the *Mirror* ought to support." Harnett drew a deeper draft on his pipe.

"Even so, with Linforth all ready to bite, is it wise to support something you know he opposes?"

In the moment's silence, Marais could picture Harnett's brows knitting fiercely as they did when his idealism was touched. The gentleness of his voice was a further proof of the faithfulness of her vision. "That's just the point I can't stick—to be bound hand and foot by the prejudices of such fellows as Linforth and his gang."

"Why not wait till you're strong enough to fight them to a winning finish?"

Harnett knocked his pipe smartly against the rock. "And play a safe, dishonest game till then? Can't be done. We can beat 'em now. Linforth's ring is sewed up with the *Journal*. His coming in with us was just a blind. But there are hundreds of people in this community who are ready to support a fearless paper."

"And what about your advertisers?" The skepticism was still strong in Dan's voice.

"When they see the way public opinion is going, they'll fall into line."

As Dan crossed his knees Marais noticed how the light from his cigar tipped with fire his wet cowlick. "You've outlined a pretty policy," he remarked, "and it'll be fine when they do come in. The question is, can you keep going till they do?"

Marais clasped her hands tightly. Although Peter Harnett said nothing for a moment, she knew that in his mind had leaped the same thought which was clawing at hers. If the advertisers failed to come through, John Wentworth would probably be called upon to supply the money to carry the paper over the lean period. He had begun his support

through his friendship for Harnett and his desire to pose as a patron of the arts; but he was a sharp business man. If he was called upon for more aid, would he leave the policy in the Chief's hands? The *Mirror* without the Chief. In the clutches of that dreadful old man. The mere possibility of such a catastrophe was intolerable. She opened her mouth.

"There are two or three ways in which we might carry on," said Harnett slowly.

Dan pondered. "Well, of course the paper's yours——"

"But it isn't," broke in Marais with such vehemence that both men started. "It belongs to Jimmie and A. B. the Pup and me and all the rest of the staff. A newspaper's different from anything else in the world. It's an invisible something that demands your energy, your loyalty, your life. You're happy in its success and miserable in its failure quite apart from any money value. You're the paper and the paper is you, your flesh and blood. We can't let anything happen to the *Mirror*. It's got to go over the top—big."

"But not at the expense of principle, Marais."

At the Chief's quiet voice Marais shrank from the violence of her outburst. "No," she admitted, "but there must be a way. We can't fail."

"No," remarked Dan as they scrambled up by common consent, and prepared for the walk home, "when you both feel as you do about it, there must be a way to save your principles and keep the *Mirror* going at the same time."

On the way down the enshrouded trail with Dan's broad shoulders looming dimly in front of her and Peter Harnett's hobnails making a steady clop-clop

in the rear, Marais's thoughts ran on with their accustomed freedom. Could anything have been luckier than for the Chief and Dan to meet as they had? Dan understood now far better than she'd been able to make him how much the *Mirror* meant to all of them. And he and the Chief had liked one another instinctively. As for the incident on the trail—her cheek throbbed now at the folly of it—her wave of feeling had been just a holdover from old days. This friendship of hers and Dan's was much bigger and finer than anything based on the romance of her youth. She could peer at him striding ahead of her without a tremor, glad they were such sane, steady friends that jaunts like this one stretched out indefinitely before them. Dear Dan, to think of bringing her mother down to Berkeley for a visit. She would forget to mention it, and in that way the suggestion would fade from his memory. No, her mother mustn't come. What would she think, for instance, of her sitting between two men on a dripping, rocky ledge away up in the Berkeley hills at nine o'clock at night? She would never understand such goings-on, as she called them. "I'm surprised that a daughter of mine would place herself in such a position." No, it would never do.

This moving forward with her companions, invisible except when they swung near her or the gusts of wind lifted the drapery of mist, gave Marais a quaint sense of the unreality of the homeward trip. Before her, behind her, on all sides the enveloping fog sifted into the ravines, leveling mountains and elevating the valleys into a thick, even plateau of gray fluidity. She had the sense of pressing forward, forever and forever being met by the impene-

trable, mobile wall of blankness. Only the consciousness that her feet were sometimes climbing, sometimes going downward, gave any sense of change or validity to the journey. Finally the continuity of the descent told her they were reaching the last cleft in the hills; she felt the flat trail leading out of Coed Canyon. At the sight of a sudden, opaque illumination in the obscurity she halted.

"Night shift working on the stadium," explained the Chief at her shoulder. "Hear them?" At his words trampling of horses' feet and the shouts of men smote dully on her ears.

Five minutes later they rounded the final curve in the valley and came upon a scene which already held Dan silent. In the glow of many powerful electric lights dimmed by thick vapor and boiling dust, men driving teams of five horses harnessed abreast were gouging from the hillside great scrapers full of earth. The friends watched the beasts plowing laboriously up the zigzag road cut in the mountain, turning in their tracks with many creakings of metal against leather and hoarse calls from the drivers, and bracing themselves for the steep journey to the edge of the precipice where the scrapers spewed their mouthfuls of dust and stones into the gorge below. In the thickness of the atmosphere their broad backs glistening dully with sweat, their strong, arched necks beneath the rippling manes, the steady thud of their great feet, gave them the proportions and majesty of prehistoric animals discerned through the mist of ages. Even the drivers, guiding them by reins and deep-chested commands, loomed in the yellow thickness more than life size.

"They might be the Israelites sweating over the

pyramids," murmured Marais. Suddenly she touched Dan's arm. "Oh, look at that horse!"

But the young man was already so engrossed in the antics of the end animal of a team dumping its load over the declivity, that he failed to hear her exclamation or to notice her hand upon his arm. At the fluttering of a rag of dirty newspaper in the windy current of fog, the horse reared and plunged. Nothing might have happened even then had a stronger eddy not blown the sheet square into its face. With a snort of terror it jerked wildly on its bit, backing and pulling to escape the white object flapping about its eyes. In vain the driver dragged on the reins and bellowed commands. The animal struggled blindly to free itself, sank in the loose earth of the shelf, stumbled and hung over the ravine.

Marais breathed in short gasps with every frantic motion of the horse. She shut her eyes tight against her mind's awful picture of the whole team precipitated, a mass of quivering flesh and harness, on the rocks a hundred feet below. Couldn't something be done? All at once she was thrilled to attention by a great, bell-toned voice.

"Hold tight and drive down like hell on the scraper!" Dan trumpeting orders.

For a moment—or was it an eternity of hours?—she watched the driver endeavor with straining muscles to obey the words of the man beside her; but his efforts were fruitless. Tight as he drew the reins, hard as he shoved the tongue of the scraper into the earth, he could no longer hold the team. The horse nearest the one already hanging over the declivity had caught the infection of fear, was being

drawn steadily over the edge, its snorting struggles only increasing the rapidity of its slide. Another instant and the whole five would be in mid-air.

Then Marais beheld a series of actions, each so swift that it outstripped every beat of her heart. With an oath Dan had drawn his body together, vaulted over the wire enclosure, and was leaping up the hillside in lion bounds. At every jump he made the catastrophe seemed imminent. Then she lost sight of him in the sea of misty, rearing, plunging heads. Suppose he should be trampled beneath the heavy hoofs. One blow and he'd never know what had struck him. She clenched her hands until the nails sank into the flesh. The congestion of blood at her heart choked its thick beating. How could she have fooled herself? Friends, indeed! Why, she loved him. He was so dear to her that if the metal struck him down——

“God!” murmured Harnett, whose existence she had forgotten.

The exclamation goaded her. But she was afraid to look, afraid not to. Then as the swaying streamers of murkiness parted, her heart threw off its dead weight, sprang up like fire in joy. Dan's tall figure poised high on the cliff, the four horses quiet beneath his reaching grasp, the fifth salvaged on the dirt half-way down the slope.

“Quick work, unbuckling that harness,” exclaimed the Chief. “Stillman certainly has a head on his shoulders. Magnificent figure of a man, isn't he?”

But the disheveled, black head, the upthrown arm disappeared before Marais's gaze. Somehow the mist had gotten into her eyes.

After they had bade the Chief good night their

walk homeward was a silent one. At the foot of the Virginia Street hill Dan took Marais's arm and they moved slowly up the empty thoroughfare. She dared not look at him. Her eyes would surely reveal her secret.

At the door Dan took her hand. She lifted her eyes. He was blotted against the light, his shoulders protectingly big. She loved his man's strong brow, contradicted by the boyish, stubborn mouth. After all, in spite of her elaborately built-up present, he would always be her playfellow Dan, his cowlick still glistening with moisture bobbing over his darkly shining eyes. They burnt into hers now with a tenderness which caught her in a splendid terror and trapped her speechless. It was as if he held her in the hollow of his hand and she hid herself there in anguished joy. Nothing mattered but the mystery of themselves.

All at once she could not stand the pain and the glory of the revelation. Pulling her hand away quickly, she turned and ran into the house.

CHAPTER IV

THE INVASION

MARAIS did not see Dan for three days and then under very different circumstances from those she had pictured to herself as she wrote up her club notes and interviewed hostesses giving early fall bridge luncheons. Coming home about six o'clock on Tuesday from the office where she had been listening rather disheartenedly to the Chief's enthusiasm about the coming election, she had paused amazed when she opened her living-room door. Instead of the quiet, shining order upon which she loved to enter, she was greeted by a reek of cigarette smoke, the offense of burnt toast, a room with chairs awry, distraught couch cover, and cups, plates, and crumpled napkins on the table and rug. From the kitchennette came the sounds of women's voices in hot argument mingled with the brisk burr of an egg beater.

The blood tingled in her face at this invasion of her privacy. Then she flashed into self-consciousness. Some one leaning back at ease in a low chair by the door, a quiet-faced, slender man tipping his head to one side, was watching her indignant face in tolerant amusement.

"Hello," he remarked, rising lazily and offering her his seat while he dropped to a cushion beside her, "I suppose you're Marais."

In spite of herself Marais smiled in response to the comradeliness of his brown eye. "I suppose I am. But I'm not quite sure."

He nodded toward the kitchenette from which floated the imperious words, "But if you're psycho-analyzed, Berta, at least you learn whether your love is a transference or——"

At the sound of the voice Marais's face cleared. Sydney had swooped down unexpectedly with some of her friends. How could she have thought that an infringement of her freedom?

"It must be a little disconcerting to find your place preëmpted like this," he observed sympathetically, and Marais's cheeks grew hot once more, this time at his penetration. "Syd decided it would be a lark to have supper ready when you came home." His voice became plaintive and he nursed his knee like a little boy. "But you were so late that we ate up the party."

"I'm sorry." The reproach in his eyes made her suddenly contrite for her tardiness. "What are they doing now?" She nodded toward the kitchenette where the whirring accompanied now by the low, rich humming of a contralto voice was still going on.

He regarded her absently. "Making an eggnog for you. I brought the nog, and Berta found the eggs in your cooler."

In the little silence Sydney's positive voice conquered the egg beater's buzz as well as the humming. "There's nothing that straightens out your love life like an analysis." Two smart taps of metal on china gave point to her remark.

The stranger continued to look at Marais with

mild, frank steadiness under which she did not feel the slightest discomfort.

"You're a different kind of wild duck from Sydney, aren't you?" he mused. "You want to stand on your strip of marsh all by yourself. And swim in your lake in a frenzy of maidenly freedom and isolation."

Marais was speechless under the gentle detachment of this statement.

"May I stand on your marsh for a while with you?" At the pensive lift of his pleasant voice she noticed what a beautiful forehead he had, white and distinguished, a forehead which should belong to a scholar, a thinker, quite in contrast to his small, curly nose and mournful, boyish eyes set wide apart in the brown paleness of his face.

He did not wait for her reply. "I know what you want to say, 'If you don't come too near.' Dear Marais, don't be disturbed. I'm amenable. I won't encroach on your puddle. But let me tell you a secret." He leaned toward her confidentially. "When you're natural, you are as companionable as any duck alive. The trouble is your sea-gull instincts are hampered by your mud-hen upbringing."

She threw back her head, laughing outright. It was amazing how well acquainted she already felt with this odd person. Suddenly amber lights began to shimmer in her eyes. "Watch out!" she cried gayly. "I, too, am a reader of character."

He settled himself more comfortably on his low seat. "Well, what do you see in the crystal of your lovely mind?"

"Perhaps I don't choose to tell."

"Oh, yes, you do. It's much too interesting to keep."

"What egotism!"

"Not at all. Merely scientific detachment. Please begin by telling me what you think of my looks." No small child begging for jam on his bread could have made his appeal more winning.

Marais's spirit rose to his audacious challenge. She drew her delicate brows together. "Your forehead is magnificent; but your profile disturbs me. It's so incomplete."

"My puritan conscience makes an excellent character builder out of that incompleteness," he remarked in modest complacency. "I've learned infinite patience waiting for my nose to take its proper proportions. You've done perfectly so far. Now what about my nature?"

Marais pursed her scarlet lips and regarded his loosely worn tweeds, her eyes finally resting on his flexible, brown hands. "You're an artist. Perhaps you paint. You're hopelessly careless. You shirk responsibility. Your adventures have been many and you have traveled far."

"Lord, you'll be putting me into one of your books the next thing."

Marais's cheek flamed quickly. "I don't write."

"I thought you were on the most progressive newspaper in the West." His mimicry of Sydney was perfect.

"That isn't writing books." Marais spoke rather shortly.

"Next step to it."

"Do you honestly think that?"

"Honor bright."

She drew a sigh and leaned back a moment, forgetful of his presence. "Oh, if I only could."

He watched between half-closed lids her parted lips and wistful eyes. "There, I knew you'd tell me the inmost secrets of your maiden heart," he murmured triumphantly.

The kitchenette door swung open and Sydney in one of Marais's aprons, bearing a tray of yellow glasses overspilling with white froth, made a slow, impressive entrance. When her sparkling eyes fell upon the man looking up into Marais's face, she called to the tall, dark woman trailing after her. "Marais is here, Berta. And will you look at the way Gil is already monopolizing her? Don't let him bore you, Marais. Now that he's found you're intelligent, he'll do nothing but talk shop." All the while that Sydney ran on she was waving away the man's lazy proffers of assistance, placing the tray with a flourish on the table, and passing the foaming drink to each of her friends. To Marais she had never looked more lovely, every bright curl bobbing in her excitement, the stray dimple near her lips roguishly winking at the march she had stolen on her friend.

"Shop?" echoed Marais.

Sydney nodded. "Writing—novel writing."

Marais said nothing. She believed that subconsciously she had known this slight, brown man from the beginning, so easily had he slipped into her line of vision. She looked from his tranquil abstraction to Sydney who stared accusingly into his dreamy eyes and then returned her friend's glance.

"Didn't you know, Marais, that his 'Dust of Tomorrow' is the best seller this year?" she queried.

“And that he’s just completed another masterpiece, ‘Martha’s Lazarus?’ Hence his trip to California by way of recuperation.”

Gil caught Sydney’s jeweled fingers in his. “Cruel Sydney, when you know that the tangle of your goldilocks alone drew me West. Though something else may keep me here,” he added in a lower tone, glancing at Marais.

“Berta, come warn this girl against the wiles of Gilfillan Sommer-in-dyke.” Sydney glanced over her shoulder. But the figure of the woman by the window remained motionless.

Sydney perched herself on the arm of Marais’s chair. “Gil made her angry by breaking a date with her and she’s still in the sulks,” she explained. “Two things you must learn about Gil, Marais. He never means one word he says——”

“I do for the first time in my life,” he protested with his first show of energy, giving Marais the fullness of his glance.

“And he is likely to record anything you say,” continued Sydney.

“If I recorded all your immortal words, sweet Sydney, my volumes would expand thus.” He stretched his arms at full length, dropping them adroitly about Sydney’s shoulders.

“Make me thy Laura, O Petrarch,” chanted Sydney. “Thus I salute thee.” She pressed her lips to his forehead. “He really has a hyacinthine brow. Don’t you think so, Marais?”

“Say it’s true. Please, Marais,” begged Gil.

But Marais’s brief flare-up of boldness had been snuffed out. Gilfillan Sommer-in-dyke, the novelist, whose book, “Dust of To-morrow,” was being

chewed over violently by the reviewers, sitting at her feet beseeching her with his eyes. Sydney bestowing upon him a careless fondness she might give to any friend. Where were one's impressions that noted men were treated with awe even in private life? Impossible to be on formal terms with this tolerant being who patted your fingers and looked into your eyes with the understanding of a comrade and a seer.

"Berta, we're lonely without you." Gil lifted his plaintive voice toward the silent figure still beside the window.

As she shrugged her shoulders and turned slowly about, Marais had her first view of the heavy, dark eyes slanting with secretiveness, and the full mouth startling enough in the dead-white face. Although she was plump, she moved with a certain rippling pliancy like a well-fed panther.

"Oh, Gil," was all she said as she came toward them, but Marais caught her breath at the liquid richness of her voice which held in its trailing inflections a volume of indifference and scorn.

"Why haven't you a piano?" she asked the girl abruptly.

"I can't afford one," laughed Marais.

Gil Sommer-in-dyke looked at the two reflectively. "She's refused to sing ever since she arrived in these parts. Now, under your roof, she offers. A triumph for you, Marais, if you only knew it."

Berta Holmes's forehead beneath its dark, satin cap of hair wrinkled in a black frown and she turned away. "Whoever heard of an apartment without a piano?" she muttered brusquely.

"Berta, you pig!" cried Sydney.

But Marais laid her hand on Sydney's arm. She understood the singer's vexation at having her impulse dissected, and forgave her the rudeness.

At that moment the doorbell rang. Sydney was on her feet, all alert. "Let me answer. I hope it's a man. We'd all be in a better humor if another one turned up." She ran to the speaking tube in the tiny hall.

"Yes, she's in." Her imitation of a pert maid was perfect. "Who shall I say is calling?"

Then her voice changed, expanding. "Who? Mr. Stillman—Mr. Dan Stillman? Why, I didn't know you were in this part of the world." She turned her flushed, amazed face to Marais. "Is it your Dan Stillman? Why didn't you tell me he was in Berkeley?"

"You really haven't given me time," murmured Marais deprecatingly.

"Besides, one doesn't tell such things," added Gil sympathetically, studying Marais's crimsoning cheeks.

As Sydney flung the door open with a trilling, "Hello, Dan Stillman. You've come at a most opportune time. How long has it been since I've seen you anyway? My grandfather's famous Hawaiian fête, I believe," Marais was swept by a flood of contradictory emotions. She had wanted to see Dan for the first time alone. And now she had to yield him to the light laughter of these people, all at once strangers to her. They'd never understand that behind his inarticulateness lay strength and swift decision and gentleness. They'd notice only the roughness of his hands, his silence in the midst of their gay chatter. But perhaps, in spite of her fears,

they'd like him, appreciate him, make him one of them. Oh, she wished they would. As for Dan himself—she glanced uneasily at his surprised face gradually settling into stubborn reserve, his jaw taking that solid line—evidently Sydney's volley of questions and welcoming information were pelting against a hardening front.

What was she saying, her head tilted provocatively? "No, I insist that my name is still Dalrymple. I'm like the pioneers. I cling to the old landmarks."

Dan looked at her over his folded arms. "What does your husband say to that?"

A moment's silence in which Marais caught Berta Holmes's insolent, golden laugh sliding through the low plaintiveness of Gil Sommer-in-dyke's voice.

Then Sydney spoke carelessly. "Quent? Oh, he doesn't care. You see, I haven't asked him to change his."

With a start Marais recollected herself. How could she have forgotten, even in the excitement of the moment, that Sydney wasn't married to Quent Waynor? And that she wanted to keep that fact from Dan? Was Sydney going to tell him right there before them all? And why was Gil Sommer-in-dyke smiling at her with such whimsical reassurance?

Suddenly she was as conscious of the wide-eyed horror of her face and Gil's understanding of it as if he had said, "Don't feel so badly about Sydney and Quent. Give yourself a little time. You'll get used to it. We all do. Really, it isn't so bad as it seems." And when she had her first glance from Dan's eyes over Sydney's perverse head, she knew he had

caught the gently amused look Gil had just shot at her, and that his face had darkened moodily.

Sydney, all unaware, broke the tension by drawing Dan gayly to where Gil and Berta lounged. "Here's an old friend of mine and Marais's who's going to play around with us," she remarked. "Most wonderful bridge builder in the world. You ought to have some marvelous stories to tell about your South American experiences, Dan." Sydney, the exploiter of talent, seated herself on the couch and lighted a cigarette.

As Dan stood, awkward and unresponsive, muttering something about having no time to play and no stories to tell, Marais looked at him incredulously. Could this heavy person be the thrilling figure poised on the fog-swept hillside three nights before?

Gil Sommer-in-dyke's compact slightness when he rose lazily was like the clean-cut blade of a stiletto in comparison with Dan's blunted, axelike clumsiness. He laid his slim fingers over Marais's bare arm. "It's not fair to leave Stillman out in the cold. I'm going to make him an eggnog; that is, if you'll show me where to find the things."

He drew her toward the kitchenette, Marais wondering with a touch of amused vexation if he injected that tender familiarity into his tone to irritate Dan. She feared his intuition. It was sure and daring enough to catch the secret between her and Dan and tease them unmercifully. But, after all, his antics were comically like those of a terrier trying to annoy a mastiff. It was funny, if only Dan could catch the idea.

But Dan's sense of humor was evidently not functioning as his somber eyes watched Gil lean his

brown head close to Marais's rippled auburn crown and whisper something at which they both smiled. With a flash of his eye he reached the swinging kitchenette door at one stride.

"Thanks." He looked Gil full in the face. "I'll make my own eggnog. And Marais doesn't need to show me where to find the things." His surly tone announced his dislike for the author and his meddling. Gil's instant release of Marais's arm and his gay little bow were an equal though more subtle avowal of his diversion at Dan's open jealousy.

CHAPTER V

A FRIEZE OF FACES

"MARAIS, did you say that fathead Wentworth's coming to see the Chief this afternoon?" Jimmie pulled his stool up to the lunch counter and took the cup of coffee white-jacketed Bill-the-Dog-Man poured him.

"That's what he told me this morning when I asked him about speaking before the Federated Women's Clubs at three o'clock," returned Marais, setting her teeth in her ham sandwich. Noon brought one such an appetite.

"Hell, death, and damnation!" growled Jimmie. "I've got to talk to him about that street-car election. If we're going into the fight, we must begin to lay out the dope for the campaign. God knows I hope we aren't."

A. B. the Pup threw back his jet pompadour with a sardonic glitter. "Lay low on the hopes. Goin' into the fight? Course we're goin' in. Wild horses wouldn't keep the Chief out. It turns my stomach inside out to think of it." He motioned to Bill to hand him another plate of doughnuts. "Wonder what he wants to see your grandpa friend for, Marais?"

Jimmie balanced himself dangerously on the foot rail. "Aw, it's Wentworth that wants to see the Chief, idiot. Marais, behold the results of a college

education." He cast a withering glance at the impassive youth licking greased sugar from his fingers. Then his sharp eye pierced the dingy windowpane. "There he goes now, pompous old buzzard. Marais knows he's got a case on her. That's why she won't squeak when we talk about the dear soul. I'm on to her."

Marais scorned to speak until they were on the sidewalk with John Wentworth's tall figure a block ahead of them. Then as she swung along between her two friends up Center Street to the office, she remarked, "As long as I'm no loss to the conversation, I'm going to take a turn in the campus." She wouldn't let them know her move was to avoid meeting "the old buzzard." And before the two, counting on another round of gossip, could protest, she had wheeled away from them and was walking briskly toward the Oxford Street entrance to the university campus.

Just what she had been longing for days to do, stroll with her own thoughts beneath the plummy pines, the gray, olive-leaved oaks, the eucalyptus trees, silver-bronze against the sharpening winter sky. Ever since, in fact, that afternoon Sydney and Gil Sommer-in-dyke and Berta Holmes had surprised her, and later, Dan. But each one of the five days had been crammed to the twelfth hour with extra work, what with the meeting of the Women's Federated Clubs in Berkeley, the visit of an Eastern college dignitary causing a succession of receptions and banquets, and the débuts of three Claremont buds. When Marais climbed the Virginia Street hill at night, she was too dog-tired to do anything but crawl into bed. This was practically the first moment

she'd had to review that scene in her living-room of Dan glowering at Gil who had twinkled back at him in a tolerantly understanding fashion, provoking to Marais even while it tickled her sense of humor. There had been no opportunity to talk to Dan later, for the crowd had decided suddenly to make an evening of it, and his muttered excuses about work to be done and disappearance before nine o'clock had been almost unnoticed in the general gayety. Marais's heart had lightened when the door closed on his big back. She was conscience-stricken now at the remembrance of her relief. But his moody silence didn't mingle well with Sydney's jokes and Gil's toasts. The next morning, however, he had rung her up before she left for the office and told her he was called suddenly north on business for the company, but would see her the minute he got back—he had something to tell her that wouldn't keep—he didn't know why things had to get tangled up in Marysville when he wanted to be in Berkeley. At this point his voice had grown husky, and Marais, with a little smile nicking her mouth into tenderness, had hung up the receiver as softly as if she did not want to interrupt the lovely train of dreams which had nothing to do with Sydney and her sophisticated friends. As she paced beside the ivy-clad banks of Strawberry Creek, crunching the dead leaves into the fresh shoots of young grass, she let her thoughts slide forward through the week to her meeting with Dan on Sunday as deliciously as the water rippled over the brown, glistening pebbles in the creek bottom.

When she swung open the wire door of the *Mirror* office, expecting to find it deserted at this hour, she

bit her lip in vexation. John Wentworth was pacing the floor, emphasizing each step by an angry swish of his gloves against his gray trousers.

"Harnett never did have any sense of time," he fumed after they had shaken hands. "Here I wire from Oakleyville to set the hour for an appointment with him, come all the way down, and he's tied up with a committee on public improvement. No wonder the *Mirror's* going on the rocks."

Marais felt herself grow cold at his last words. "He'll be back pretty soon, I'm sure," she remarked quietly, taking her place at her desk.

"Pretty soon," snorted Wentworth. "Pretty soon won't do. A friend of mine's coming here to see him on business at two o'clock. And I've got to talk to him first. What's all this I hear about the street-car election? If Harnett's big enough ass to— Excuse me, Marais." With a gesture of irritation he pulled out his watch. "It's after one now. What am I going to do?"

Her gaze traveled to the bulging veins in his temples beneath the fringe of dyed hair, to the saliva gathering in the corners of his bleak mouth. If he wasn't careful these increasing excesses of temper would bring him to a sudden end. Old men couldn't rage and foam and live on forever. A sudden, tremulous turn of his bald head shook her heart with pity. After all he'd been a neighbor and friend for a lifetime. She could never forget that he hadn't hurried her mother and her in the payment of the mortgage.

"I don't know what you'll do unless you let me put you to work," she smiled at him as she thrust a

broken pencil into the sharpener on the wall, and curled off the wood with precision.

John Wentworth's eyes lost their blurred rage as they rested upon her face. The movement of his tongue over his lips made the girl shiver.

"You know, Marais, if you want me to do anything for you——"

The telephone ripped into the cracked silkiness of his tone. With thankfulness for the interruption she took down the receiver. "Yes, dear, he's here. I'll tell him you want to speak to him."

"It's Sydney. She's on this side." She handed him the instrument, taking care not to touch his clutching hand.

"How in the world did she find I was here, the minx? Up to some of her tricks, I'll wager," he muttered, taking his place at the telephone.

As his face fell into unwilling, listening lines at Sydney's silver, crescendo ripple over the wire, Marais began sorting the afternoon papers heaped on her desk.

The wire door clicked. A shadow across the floor caught her eye up from the printed page. A young man stood there, holding the door open easily, a faint smile hovering about his lips. His sultry, black eyes met Marais's questioning gaze into which struggled a dawning, bewildered recognition. While she stared at him a curious change took place in his face. It was as if a veil had been drawn over his ivory skin, shriveling it to ash color. His suave smile became fixed and the pupils of his eyes were lost in opaqueness.

The girl could not articulate a sound. She con-

tinued to stare and stare, her tongue like paper in her parched mouth.

John Wentworth's thin tones broke the stillness: "I can't talk any more now, Sydney. Preston Marbury is here. Yes, Preston Marbury. No, he won't have time to see you. We're going into conference with Harnett. Good-by." He rose and stood smiling at the figure in the doorway in a swimming, foolish fashion. "You remember Preston Marbury, Marais. Why, of course, you two knew one another in Oakleyville."

Did she remember him? Marais's eyes resting on the young man's fixed smile caught back of his head a flutter of yellow tags fastened by a rusty hatpin over Jimmie's desk, his schedule for each day's work. She'd forgotten to give him the dope on the college president's past—must do so to-morrow—he'd asked her a dozen times for it. Did she remember him? Was it a dream that she had once sat on the moonlit shelf at Marbury Heights and touched the close-thatched head bowed on her knee? The odor of fried ham floated to her through the window—Bill-the-Dog-Man cooking lunch for some hungry customer hunched over the counter. Did she remember? Could she ever forget this stranger's distorted face in the glimmering room, the humped shadow on the ceiling wavering close and closer, and her shuddering arousal to find old Jim Hasler's eyes staring at her across a blank gulf?

She was conscious that the stranger by the door had stepped aside, that the Chief had entered and Mr. Wentworth was greeting him. "And Harnett, here's the chap I've been wanting you to meet. He's

been doing a big piece of promoting work in New York. Got the best business head on his shoulders of any young fellow in the West."

He seemed to have forgotten the incident of Jim Hasler's home; that he had warned her once against Preston Marbury's slippery ways. His hand rested affectionately upon the young man's shoulder, he gloated upon him, turning his bleared eyes finally toward the girl. "Marais, I'm going to leave Preston to you while Peter and I have a word. Then you're to come in, boy."

"Don't hurry, Mr. Wentworth. I'm glad to wait. Especially in such good hands." She was burningly aware of the bland respect of Preston's words. So he had wound his way into John Wentworth's good graces by playing upon his senility.

Left alone with her Preston stepped softly into the middle of the room, and regarded her steadily with his thick, black eyes.

"Marais," the sliding nuances of his voice struck the strings of her memory into quivering motion, "Marais, can you ever forgive me?"

Something flat in the question, a false note in his tone, restored the girl to her accustomed poise. She regarded him levelly. "For what?"

The forced distress in his eyes faded into blankness. "Why, for losing my head that night at Marbury Heights."

"Oh," a smile touched her lips, but her eyes remained grave, "that wasn't a thing to be forgiven. It was a mistake to be corrected."

His shoulders became more confident. He drew a little closer. "I'm here to correct it now, Marais. When I opened the door and saw you sitting there,

so lovely, so altogether unlike any one else in the world——”

She seated herself and lighted a cigarette. “This isn’t the place to correct a mistake such as you made,” she observed quietly, sending a line of smoke toward two flies sliding along near the ceiling as on an invisible tight rope.

“Where should it be corrected?” His voice held a shade less of assurance.

“Every time you meet a woman.”

It seemed to her he hid his discomfiture beneath a sneer. “Preaching a little?”

Marais smiled frankly. “Oh, no. Just putting in a word for the foolish girls who might believe themselves in love with you. As I once did.”

His sneer became more open. “So—you merely believed you loved me,” he remarked reflectively. “I flattered myself it was a pretty fair imitation of the real thing.”

She shook her head. “Still it was an imitation.”

He fingered the familiar ribbon which held his gold pencil. “May one ask how you know? By comparison?”

Tawny sparks danced in the depths of Marais’s eyes. He’d never believe the truth in its simplicity. “Of course. How else?” She shrugged slightly.

A dark flush mounted to his temples. Even with his own passion for her dead he couldn’t stand the hint of another’s interest.

“Are you in love with Stillman yet?” He slurred the words, an ugly look about his mouth.

She felt the vein throb in her cheek. A biting retort leaped to her tongue, but she bit it back, aware that she was a fool to antagonize him utterly. If he

exerted an undue influence on John Wentworth closeted now with the Chief, and should use it in regard to the *Mirror*—a random thought but strengthened by the old man's admiring words, "He's been doing a big piece of promoting work in New York,"—she'd never forgive herself.

She made an attempt at lightness in her response: "You wouldn't be interested if I told you. Will you pardon me while I finish a piece of work I've got to get out before to-morrow?" She wheeled her chair about to her desk. At least she needn't keep up this pretense at polite talk.

Perhaps it was only the flash of his eye which Marais saw, but it seemed to her that he took a step forward. She never knew the truth of her impression, for at that moment a golden whirlwind burst through the door and Sydney's gay voice poured into the gulf between them. "Well, of all fortunate things." And she had extended her slender, suède-covered hands which Preston was pressing with the graceful ardor Marais knew so well.

"Just when I need some one to play around with, Preston," Sydney snapped her fingers prettily, "you drop from heaven. When grandfather said over the phone that you were here, seriously I regarded it as an answer to prayer. You know one's puritan ancestry will out. Wasn't it lucky Aunt Deborah's cold brought us to Berkeley this morning?"

She scarcely seemed to hear his avowal that he was at her disposal, for suddenly she had stepped back and was regarding him with mockingly solemn eyes. "Are you terribly busy?" she asked slowly. "Because all the men I meet in California, including

my old friend, Dan Stillman, are so weighted with work that they haven't a single minute for a good time."

Marais thought the young man's eye gleamed maliciously. He murmured, "Every man must be busy in these days of economic pressure. But how any one could resist——"

"Come with me while I pick up my mother." Sydney interrupted him with swift imperiousness. "I want to tell you about these friends I have with me from New York. If we're going to make a foursome, you must know your quartet."

Marais opened her lips, but Preston forestalled her. "Sorry to refuse the first thing you ask me to do. But I'm waiting now to be called into conference."

Sydney tilted her chin scornfully. "With grandfather and Mr. Harnett?"

He nodded.

"Marais'll bear me out that when they're closeted they talk for hours. Isn't it true, old dear?" With a swift motion Sydney had darted to Marais's side and was rumpling her hair, coquetting with her, as Marais knew well, to coax a confirmatory response to her question.

"Sometimes," she admitted reluctantly.

"Sometimes," mimicked Sydney. "Always, you mean, solemn-faced honesty." She shook Marais gently, then faced Preston, her hands still on her friend's shoulders.

"Will you go if I bring you back in fifteen minutes?" Her tone wheedled the young man.

Marais knew the struggle he was having. Too bad his diplomatic sense had to choose between wait-

ing for the banker and pleasing his fascinating granddaughter. "I'm afraid—" he murmured.

"Ten minutes?" Marais felt Sydney's fingers tighten on her arms. Although she couldn't see her friend's face, she knew the little teeth were catching the red, lower lip and the bronze eyes had commenced to shoot rebellious sparks.

"Are you sure it will be just ten minutes?" he hesitated.

Sydney unbuckled her wrist watch with a flourish. "Absolutely sure. Marais shall time us. Back on the dot, dear heart, so don't look so dubious about it." With a light kiss on her friend's head Sydney swept Preston out the door in her triumphal wake. As she went, Marais could hear her clear treble, "I wonder if you have the same reaction to New York that I do. Great difference between it and the West. So much more freedom there. Gil Sommer-in-dyke says——"

Marais looked with unseeing eyes at the piece of work which had been her excuse for turning her back on Preston Marbury. The sapphires in Sydney's platinum watch on her desk mocked her. "You thought you'd never see Preston Marbury again. But the world's rather a small place, after all. Going to be prudent and hold your tongue or be a true friend and warn Sydney? Why not let her find him out for herself?"

Suddenly she prickled with irritation. Why had Sydney set so many perplexing questions buzzing in her mind? Why did Sydney walk into the room of one's life, flashing the darkest corners with her brilliancy, only to leave the walls and floor bare and desolate upon her abrupt departure? Why had she

decided that Preston Marbury was worth a week's flirtation? Sydney and Preston Marbury. Marais lifted her shoulders to shake off the hateful linking of those names. How could she be considering them when Sydney and Quent Waynor——

The Chief's door opened and John Wentworth's tones menaced high on the end of a phrase, "Remember, Peter, if it's the street-car fight for you, there'll be no help from me."

"Well, Marbury, my boy——" At sight of only Marais at her desk the old man paused, cast a perplexed look about the room, and came back to the girl's solitary figure.

"Where is he?" The testy frown wrinkling his forehead and the querulousness in his voice were as swift as Sydney's moods.

Marais hesitated to reply. She didn't see why the avalanche of his wrath should descend upon her head. Besides, they'd be back any moment.

"Marais, where's Marbury?" The sharp question rapped her into the necessity of a reply.

"He went on an errand," she countered.

"An errand! When he knew we'd be ready for him in five minutes? What errand?" The old man's anger was rising with each question. "What errand?"

"Sydney came. He went with her to get Mrs. Dalrymple. They'll be back any moment."

"The hussy. After I told her to let him alone." From the congestion of his eyes and the thick rage of his speech one might think he was jealous of Sydney's attentions to Preston.

Marais watched in mesmeric fascination for the inevitable outburst as he strode twice across the

room, clenching and unclenching his hands, biting his bloodless lips. Finally, as she had ironically foreseen, he stopped before her as if he were a judge and she the culprit.

"There's only one thing that talks to that trollop. Money. That's it. I know. Well, I'll stop that kind of talk. I'll disown her. I'll cut her off without a cent—now. Coming up here and interfering with my business plans. She thinks she can carry it off with a high hand, does she? We'll see about that. Some day she'll go one step too far. I'll teach her to run around with every man she sees just as if she weren't married to Waynor. Why, she's lost all sense of decency." His cheeks became mottled. "Does she never think she's dragging my name in the dust by her carryings on? Has she no consideration for my dignity in the community? For my position in the state?" Between each sentence he snorted like a bull hard put to it, glaring down upon Marais as if demanding from her the answers to his questions.

Marais looking into his little, fiery eyes above suddenly inflamed pouches of skin, wondered scornfully how he reconciled his standard of respectability for Sydney with his secret advances to her. All at once she was seized by an emotion as fierce as that which gripped the old man. Apoplectic as was his face even to the shriveled neck above his immaculate collar, she had no concern for the effect of his wrath upon his health—or upon Sydney's happiness. Her hand trembled so that she was forced to lay down the paper she was holding.

Why did he come here thrusting his face into hers because of Sydney's faults? If it hadn't been for

the two of them, Preston Marbury, unimportant as he was, would not have happened across her path. They had invaded the privacy, the precious freedom of her life. She felt as if she would smother. People, people, people! Ever since Sydney had burst into the office that first day she had been restless, her thoughts had been elbowed by too many problems, her mind crowded by strangers. In her dreams a frieze of faces swam before her beclouded eyes. Sydney's bright beauty, Mrs. Dalrymple's haunted eyes, Gil Sommer-in-dyke's mocking smile, Berta Holmes's sullen, heavy profile, John Wentworth's secret, malignant smirk. Now Preston Marbury would be added to the nightly gallery. What right had they to intrude upon her hard-bought liberty? Why had complicating problems injected themselves into her work and friendships? She squeezed the paper in her hands until it crackled like firecrackers.

Her fingers relaxed. One thing lifted her heart from its turbulent battle. Dan would be back at the end of the week. There was anchorage in the thought of his big quietude. She loved the sweet, silent wildness of the wind that blew them together in their walks.

Thus absorbed, she was scarcely conscious that John Wentworth's eyes were still demanding justification for his balked pride, and that the Chief had opened his door inquiringly. In the stream of her indignation she was still clinging to the bough which dipped its trailing green upon the foaming waters. Dan would be back on Sunday.

CHAPTER VI

MARAIS AND CHRISTINE

THROUGH all the days of that week the flow of Marais's imagination was steadily toward Sunday, but a letter from Dan suddenly dammed it up. The letter was no longer than the technical setting forth of reasons for extending his stay in Marysville a week—or even two—required. One sentence toward the end made her knit her brows in excited curiosity. "Perhaps I'll have a surprise for you." But it was the postscript which shocked her into ecstasy every time she read it. "I can hardly wait to see you." That from Dan; inarticulate, tender Dan.

In spite of the bells set ringing in her heart by the postscript, however; in spite of her solitary walks in the campus when the sunset laid a bride's carpet of living rose through the Golden Gate and the trees stood motionless, held in a dark green, magic hush; in spite of the lyrics she took to composing in secret at night, shrinking even at the thought of the jeers of Jimmie and A. B. the Pup if they knew what she was about, Marais found herself for the first time bored by her work. She felt as inert as a clod at the boys' jokes, and lapsed into an indifference to the growing tension at the *Mirror* office due to the coming election. The November days dragged along heavy with smoke-colored clouds. And she knew why.

"Marais," bawled A. B. the Pup, sticking his head in the office door one afternoon as she came in from the composing room, "that Lorimer dame rang up while you were out. Wants to know if you'll come up and give her luncheon table the once over."

"Don't yell so loud." Marais sat down at her desk and took the receiver crossly from the hook. "I'm not deaf."

A. B. looked at her in injured amazement. "Well, you needn't take my head off. What's the matter with you lately? You snap like a she tiger." He hunched himself out of the room indignantly.

"Sorry, Mrs. Lorimer, but there's so much work in the office, I haven't a second to come up for a peep at your table." She'd be blest if she was going to do any more raving over autumn decorations. "Yes, I'm disappointed too. I know everything looks lovely. Maroon chrysanthemums, you say?" She drew her pad toward her mechanically. "And oak leaves. An exquisite combination. You give things such a touch. Yes, I have the whole thing. It'll make a stunning write-up. Thank you."

Did women never get tired of giving stupid luncheons? She sat looking with gloomy, dispirited eyes at her scribbled notes, wishing impatiently they were in Halifax and she had the whole day to do what? She didn't know.

A gentle knock vibrated the wire door to a soft, singing tone. She looked up, surprised. Nobody ever knocked. People just walked in. The door opened a brief space. Gil Sommer-in-dyke stood there, smiling quietly.

"May a bit of news come into this office?" he asked.

Marais's oppression vanished instantly. She had not seen the novelist but once since the day at her apartment, yet here he stood, viewing her with the quaint friendliness of a lifetime. And by an odd turn his figure, comfortable in its old brown clothes, his mild, quizzical face, even the soft, battered hat he fingered a little uncertainly were as familiar to her as if her eyes rested upon them every day. Pleasantly familiar too. His manner held a flicker of apprehension lest his intrusion displeased her. Queer how she seemed instinctively to understand his moods. His hesitancy, as though he were pausing on the brink of a delightful, unexplored adventure, pleased her. She was all at once alive, every nerve tingling with anticipation.

"That's what the office is for," returned she gravely, her eyes shining.

He advanced a step. "If I can prove I am really news, am I always welcome to come?"

Marais felt it time to make reservations. One could not trust this whimsical person too far. "To the office, yes."

He sat down with leisurely assurance in a chair grown unsteady under the wriggings of A. B.

"But of course," she added, "you might be rejected at that."

"Even if I proved I was always news?" he persisted plaintively.

Marais looked at him severely. "The *Mirror* reserves the right to choose its news. Besides, we're speaking from suppositions. You haven't proved that you are news. You've taken your seat on a mere assumption."

Gil's brown eyes glanced at the rickety chair be-

neath him, and Marais thought he murmured something that sounded like, "That's true." Then he looked at her with an unmoving calm. "No, when I tell you, you'll admit axiomatically that I am news. Madame Sydney bids me invite you to reserve the evening of the twenty-ninth. On which occasion she is to hold a salon." Of course. The party Sydney had already spoken of, and to which she'd asked Marais if Dan could take her. *Could he?* "Now isn't that news—for a society editor?" concluded Gil.

Marais shook her head slowly. "Not in the primary sense of the word news, for this society editor already knows about the event. Therefore it is no longer news to her."

"It still remains news in the universal sense because it is interesting," observed Gil, mildly imperturbable.

"You evidently thought it very precious to bring it in person all the way from San Francisco." Marais's tone was a shade caustic. "Wouldn't the telephone have served?"

"Not if I wanted to be the news myself? You see the bearer and the idea are one. That's why I am the news itself."

Marais tried to harden herself against the fascination of this foolishness. She looked at her watch. "Metaphysics at two o'clock in the afternoon can't be done. Besides, according to your own definition, you're no longer news."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because you've separated the bearer and the idea."

"No, I'm still functioning as news. I haven't

shared with you the cream of my message yet. I'm to come to fetch you to the party on the appointed night. Madame Sydney's orders."

Marais pressed her lips together. Sydney knew the plan was for her and Dan to go across the bay together. This was her trick to tease Marais and avenge herself on Dan for what she called his churlishness.

She glanced at Gil's quietly assured figure and smiled at the prick she was going to give Sydney's impish, many-colored bubble plan. "According to your definition I'm also a piece of news," she said abruptly.

His eyebrows went up in two interrogatory arches.

"I can't go with you to Sydney's party. I'm already bespoken."

The shadow of disappointment which fell over his meditative eyes robbed her small triumph of its thrill. He opened his lips, then closed them as if on second thought the speech was better left unmade. After a moment he said pensively, "Yes, that's news—bad news. You'll eat pink ice cream with me at the party anyway, won't you?"

Marais laughed outright. How could he possibly know that pink ice cream had stood in her childish thoughts for circus day in Oakleyville when the glittering, braying procession of animals in their cages, strange, gorgeously dressed men and women on curvetting horses, and the deliciously silly black and white striped clowns moved as a quickly fading dream before her dazzled eyes down Central Avenue? And afterwards she rested her tired legs on one of "Doc" Farley's high stools and cooled her hot mouth with spoonsful from the heaping dish of

pinkness before her on the marble counter, while his little, kind eyes twinkled above his white coat and he kept wiping his hands on a towel and saying, "There now, I bet that'll cool your little gullet." And yet he did know. He evidently appreciated the symbolism of pink ice cream. He'd probably been a wistful little boy with big mournful eyes and sensitive mouth that trembled when nobody was looking. Certainly he'd grown up to be an understanding man. How ready he seemed to take only what she was prepared to give. "You'll eat pink ice cream with me at the party anyway, won't you?" The result of his philosophy, perhaps, a detached view of things which took life as it came with a shrug.

The telephone brought her up with a start. At the end of her talk with the president of the Twentieth Century Club she turned sternly toward Gil inoffensive in his rickety chair. She was going to say, "Maybe I'll eat pink ice cream with you the night of Sydney's party. I'm sorry I've not time to play around now." But he was already so immersed in a red leather, pocket copy of Samuel Butler's "The Way of All Flesh," that she didn't have the heart to disturb him. So she turned her back and went to work. In her absorption she outwardly forgot his presence, yet in an odd way remained conscious of the white, lowered brow, the slender, brown hand propping the quiet head, the simple completeness with which he melted into the atmosphere of the office.

When Jimmie shot in two hours later it seemed natural for him and Gil to fall into newspaper talk. Marais didn't know till then that the novelist had worked for years on a New York paper. He made

it the inevitable thing to wait until she tidied her desk, jotted down her memoranda for the next day's work, and then walked with her, uninvited but hopeful, up the Virginia Street hill. Almost without her being aware of it he was cutting the bread, setting the table while she cooked supper, they were eating it, seated opposite one another like old friends, they were talking, talking as the minute hand of her wrist watch slipped around the gold face with cunning unnoted swiftness. How could she remember time when Gil had persuaded her to bring out the unfinished manuscript of her novel, when, seated now on the same side of the cleared table, her cheeks glowing until she could feel them hot against her propped hands, they were going over her story step by step, Gil offering trenchant criticisms, she accepting them breathlessly, more and more alive to his mastery of his art as well as his power of critical analysis.

"Of course Christine is you," he remarked somewhat abruptly, his pencil poised from making notes.

She flushed a deeper red beneath his clear gaze. "No—yes—I suppose she is," she finally stammered.

He caught her discomfiture and hastened to put her at her ease. "That's as it should be. Always, or nearly always, one's first novel is autobiographical. But you'll have to change your plot action if you keep Christine in color."

"Why?"

"Because she'll never join her life with Wedderly's without benefit of clergy."

"But that's the very crux of my story," protested Marais warmly. "That's how she finds her way out."

Gil's eyes became quieter than ever. "She may go with him, believing she will find herself that way—yes; but she'll discover she's in a worse slavery than ever through the nagging of conscience."

The corners of Marais's scarlet mouth still quivered skeptically.

Gil moved about so that he faced her more fully. Here was evidently something which needed talking out. "Remember, Marais, that Christine is a girl with a puritan background, the marks of which she carries to her grave. She isn't one of you ultra-modern types, but, if I get her, a holdover from the Victorian Age and at the same time an aspirant for revolt. Much more interesting. Much. She can't take the step she contemplates and find in it release for her spirit. She has had too big a dose of old theology of her youth. Besides, there's the strain of heredity you've got to take into account. Believe me, Christine, to be consistent, must find, as most real people do, sooner or later, that there's no such thing as external freedom. Her best bet for it will be in never compromising with herself, in making her own reckonings with life. Irrespective of people and places and things. Externals will never satisfy such a soul."

"But what about Riega in your own 'Dust of To-morrow'?" The words burst from Marais as though she could not keep them back. "Didn't you have the whole rich maturing of her life depend upon just such a step?"

"But Riega was of a different breed from Christine. She was dead sure that living with Frobisher was the only thing for her. She didn't have any qualms or inhibitions. Your Christine is always

wanting to argue about her moves. She is on the defensive. A sure sign she's uneasy in her soul. To her it's an immorality to live with a man she isn't married to. No gesture, no debating can ever put it over with her. She might go with Wedderly, but her act would stamp the letter A on her breast."

Suddenly he pushed the manuscript away and refused to discuss it further. Instead he stretched himself on the couch and smoked a long, black cigar while he hummed "Old Black Joe" and "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground" in a plaintive tenor with a slight squeak in it. Finally he got to his feet and said good night in an absent-minded manner, kissing Marais lightly on the forehead.

During the days which followed she found herself amusedly helpless in his presence. He was like a bird from an alien clime hovering quietly near her, ready at a breath to soar away to the wide, glittering region from which he had come. He talked of art of music, of books with the familiarity with which the people of Oakleyville discussed the crops, the weather, and each other, spoke the names of writers—names she breathed with awe—and read to her snatches from their letters with the carelessness of old friendship. She was divided between vexation at his calm assumption of her liking and fear lest he become invisible, leaving her without a glimpse through the doors he had swung open for her eager eyes.

In the middle of the second week following Dan's departure, when she saw Sydney, the latter smiled mischievously and whispered, "Better look out for old bear Dan."

To her annoyance Marais could feel the blood

flowing to her forehead. She drew away from Sydney's encircling arm. "I don't know what you mean," she said coldly.

But Sydney only held her the tighter. "I might have expected it of any one but you, old dear," she teased, and Marais resolved to forbid Gil's visits to the office. But when she faced his guileless gaze, she couldn't make the flippant speech with which she had intended to take the sting out of the rebuff. "As you're no longer news, you've no right in the office." So he continued to come every day to Berkeley. Sometimes, if he happened into the office in the morning, he made ridiculous versions of her copy, and when the noon siren shattered his inspiration, they went to Bill-the-Dog-Man's to lunch. There, clinging to his high stool, he read her his verses over their fried-ham sandwiches and coffee, Marais absently watching the cabbage-leaf ear of Bill at his stove and gurgling at Gil's quips. Sometimes they fought one another hard in the interests of their ideas.

"'Sculptured slime' is a good way of describing naturalism." Marais warmly.

"You don't justify or decry naturalism—or realism either." Gil always drawled his words when he was sure of his ground. "The line of distinction can't be drawn between the two. Where does realism end and naturalism begin?"

Marais hard on the bit. "Naturalism begins when every ethical sense of values is out, and life becomes material to be used as an end in itself."

"Well, let me tell you that there's less danger of dishonesty that way than in the attitude of many writers of realism. They justify themselves by

their preaching instead of their fidelity to just the truth about human life and this world."

Marais clapped her hands excitedly. "Caught. Why pretend to be an observer on the side lines when you're heart and soul committed to naturalism?" Here her tone became satirical. "What if it does strain all the beauty and idealism out of life and then asks us to admire the art with which the muddy residue has been handled? What's the difference?"

Ignoring the irony of her words, Gil shrugged his shoulders in provoking sympathy.

After a moment Marais again. "I suppose that's why your novels are said to be so well written but depressing in tone."

"I confess they've been written with a due regard for the truth as it comes to me," Gil admitted modestly. "If you want life coated with honey, don't look for it in my books."

"I'm not interested to find that kind of life," flashed Marais. "All the same, sordidness and vice shouldn't be depicted as an end in themselves."

"That's fine. By that speech you've proved true what I have believed of you from the first time I set eyes upon you." Gil's face settled into lines of placid satisfaction.

But for all her begging he would not tell her the meaning of his cryptic utterance until one evening at the apartment when, after more coaxing than he customarily employed, she had consented to let him make some charcoal sketches of her.

"Have you a loose jacket of some kind with a splash of color about it?" he asked her. "I brought some hoop earrings in the hope that you'd relent

and pose for me. They ought to give you just the touch we need."

Marais donned her blue and white coolie coat and bound a red silk handkerchief about her head. She looked strangely exotic with the gold rings swinging from her ears beneath the rich waves of russet hair. Gil placed her indolently among the pillows on the couch, a half-smoked cigarette drooping from her fingers, her dark eyes turned with level detachment half aside. A stranger returned her gaze with side-long, red-lipped aloofness in the tarnished mirror. Gil had certainly transformed her.

She studied his absorbed face reflectively as he worked on his big, white expanse of paper in long, certain strokes. Why had he sought her out so persistently during the last two weeks that she had almost forgotten her impatience at Dan's enforced delay? She had so little to give. How was she to know that the proud turn of her slender head, the question, the rebellion in her eyes where stars dwelt, her eagerness for life which would surely tear her in her passionate pressing forward, were a challenge to his mind, while the fragrance of her high youth, her very vividness toned his jaded senses to a resiliency they had not known for years. A nod and she responded like a mettlesome race horse. What an experiment to try his hand at guiding her. Good Lord, he'd forsworn such follies how many years ago? Yet how often did one chance upon a creature as rare as she? If these were the thoughts sifting through his mind as he sat at the table in the *Mirror* office constructing roundelays, or dreaming with his eyes on the girl's bent head, or gazing at the bronze hills sharply cut against the deep November sky, or

now as he studied her relaxed grace, Marais had no hint of such a thing.

Suddenly he broke the stillness that had fallen upon them, as if in answer to her silent question. "You're lovely to look upon, Maraissima," he declared softly. "Your eyes are a mountain lake with pale water-lily stars floating upon it. Your hair has caught the sunrise gold. And your shoulders are those of the dawn goddess. But," he added in yet a lower tone, "you're a hopeless Puritan."

"I?" She sat up, astonished.

"No less," he asseverated quietly, making a careful stroke. "You and Christine. It's one and the identical thing."

Marais continued to look at him, her eyes growing larger. "How can you say that?" she stammered.

It was then that he satisfied her curiosity about his discovery. "Because it's true," he replied. "You proved it to me the other day in your argument about naturalism and realism. Do you think if you weren't a dyed-in-the-wool moralist, you would have hesitated to let your friend Stillman know about Syd and Quent?"

The blood drained from her cheeks. So his keen eyes had seen her shrink that afternoon in the apartment. But how could he call her a Puritan? Just when she had decided that his chief interest in her lay in her freedom from smug moralism.

"Far be it from me to sit in judgment on Sydney." In spite of her efforts at nonchalance her voice trembled. "But if I were going to live with a man, I'd be so sure of my step that the world could know it." With the flinging back of her head the golden hoops in her ears imprisoned the bright-

ness of the chandelier, and her bosom beneath the coat rose and fell quickly.

"Why keep the world informed of one's movements?"

"There's a difference between secrecy and privacy."

For a moment their glances met and clashed in the sharp antagonism of human wills, male and female. Then Gil, once more the artist, took in with apparent satisfaction her dilated, magnificent pose.

"You ought to see yourself against those gold and crimson cushions, Marais," he murmured. "You've created a regal atmosphere." In his eyes flickered an expression she failed to understand, a compound of sadness, admiration, a warmer emotion, mingled with a touch of skepticism. "But you could never do what Riega did, could you?" he observed a little wistfully.

Marais lighted a cigarette with a brave show of coolness; but the hand that held the match shook. "Do you think I lack the courage?"

"Not to go. But your conscience would hound you to hell afterwards."

She puffed furiously for an instant, her eyes shining black and incredibly big above her ashen cheeks. Suddenly she flung out her arm and her voice broke in thick gusts.

"If you knew how hard I've tried to get away from all that—" She'd been so happy in the belief that she had won her place as a free, self-asserting person. But how it all came back with a sickening rush at his words—her mother's lifted finger, the flinching remembrance of the eternal don'ts—"you'd never say such a thing. Never. I'd rather you had

said anything else. It's—it's just as if a hand were trying to thrust me back into prison. When I believed I had escaped forever. Oh, why did you say it?—you, of all people!"

Her voice choked. But instead of burying her face in her hands as Gil, aghast at her burst of emotion, thought she was going to do, she stiffened, her fantastic figure against the bright pillows dilated, her head swathed in its red brocade held itself so taut that the hoops scarcely moved, while her eyes stared steadily through Gil and beyond him to the open apartment door. She had told him to latch it. But he'd forgotten to do so. Stared at a big, young man throwing a blob of black hair out of his bewildered eyes, smiling awkwardly from her to the figure beside him, a straight, middle-aged woman whose shoulders beneath her severe, tailored suit had a militancy repeated in the firm line of her wide mouth and the hawk look of her light eye. Even in the brief sweep of that eye upon her, Marais was quiveringly conscious of her own bizarre appearance, her rumpled hair, the loose coat, open upon her white breast, the half-smoked cigarette in her hand, the disheveled couch, Gil in the intimacy of her apartment.

She caught Dan's smoldering gaze as it rested for the first time on Gil's face. Through the roaring in her ears she heard his voice, brusque, husky, and trembling a little: "Well, Marais, your mother and I thought we'd give you a surprise."

CHAPTER VII

MRS. PLOVER

"YOUR mother and I thought we'd give you a surprise. I had a hard time persuading her she could get away, but I told her football games weren't pulled off every day in the week and she wasn't going to miss the one between California and Stanford. Not if I could help it."

Yes, those were real words, Dan's words, and Mrs. Plover was standing there in the middle of the floor, looking at Marais with her genial, company smile and behind it that terrible appraisement her daughter knew so well.

As the girl, throwing off her first shock of surprise, scrambled from the couch and went to greet her mother, she had a distinct impression of a change in Mrs. Plover. She looked smaller than the image Marais carried in her mind. When she helped her off with her coat, the shoulders, held with the old, militant courage, seemed a little shrunken, and her face, always square and firm, had contracted into a pinched sallowness. Marais's heart flooded with a sudden, stricken tenderness. All alone off there in Oakleyville, baking cakes for Hay Spinkham, keeping the upstairs immaculate for Abner Jewett's three clerks, who were now her roomers, paying the mortgage money to John Wentworth with

cheerful regularity each month. No wonder she shriveled under the monotony of it all.

But afterwards when Gil was presented to her and they sat chatting, Marais lost her first feeling in the renewed familiarity of her mother's decided tones, the set of her straight pompadour, her courteous attention to the conversation Gil bestirred himself to keep going. She showed no signs of illness, and as for years, though she had always seemed middle-aged, why, she couldn't be more than fifty-one. Just in her prime. She had a way with people, no doubt of that. Already Gil was watching her with a glint in his eye which Marais knew bespoke real interest. The same power that drew admiring blasphemy from Hay Spinkham and made Uncle Webb tell her his escapades in the old days. Something dramatic, vital, a human kinship with people when her disciplinary sense wasn't involved. A mist sent the figures of Dan and Gil and her mother and the objects in the apartment swimming dizzily together. What fun they might have had, she and her mother! Her reflections were interrupted by the lively talk between the novelist and Mrs. Plover.

"When does he sell the *Saturday Evening Post*?" asked Gil.

"On Saturday morning."

"Has it proved a good thing for the lad?"

Mrs. Plover's dry reply drew a chuckle from both men. "It's proved good to the tune of twelve or fifteen dollars a month."

"How about the effect on him? Does it give him an increasing sense of responsibility and of money value?"

She knitted her heavy, black brows. "I'm not

sure that he needs either. He's highly nervous, overly conscientious. Sometimes I've thought of persuading him to give up the route on that account. I hardly know what to do. What do you think?"

Before Marais's mind's eye flashed a scene she had witnessed on her last, brief visit home. Young John standing on the square of brick at the foot of the kitchen steps, his papers bag strapped across his shoulders, waiting with stormy, pleading, red-brown eyes for his mother's parting phrase, "Good luck to you." Because she failed to place quite the right emphasis on the word "to" he had turned pale and stamped his foot until she had repeated the formula to his satisfaction. After his cap, scarcely holding down his red, belligerent hair, had disappeared around the corner of the house, his mother still stood there in her clean, checked calico house dress, her eyes looking out the wire door with a dumb tenderness so like that of Grandmother Haliburton when Uncle Webb's name was mentioned that Marais's heart ached. How little she understood the relation between them, her own mother and her own brother. Gil was drawing more from Mrs. Plover than she had been able to do when she had remonstrated with her mother for indulging Young John in such tantrums. "You don't know anything about it. Wait till you have a son of your own," had been her crisp and final period to their brief talk. But now she was replying to Gil's "I'd like to hear more about that lad, Mrs. Plover. He interests me," by saying with warm sincerity, "It will be a relief to talk to somebody. And a man's judgment is nearly always apt to be saner than a woman's, I

think." Strange that there had never been any doubt in her mind regarding her method of bringing up her daughter. Marais smiled a little bitterly, and was then freshly surprised, as Dan and Gil rose to go, to find them collaborating on a plan for taking her mother to the football game on Saturday while Mrs. Plover stood there, smiling, erect, interested, eager to show them how glad she was to deliver her time, herself, her plans into their keeping.

"I'll get Sydney and Berta and Mrs. Dalrymple over here by noon." Whenever had lazy Gil roused himself to such activity?

"We'll have to do some skirmishing for seats, but the sky's the limit. I know a guy that'll fix me up." Dan spoke with equal enthusiasm, Dan with whom Marais hadn't had a word.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a Roman matron with a keen sense of humor for a mother?" asked Gil in a low tone when he said good night to the girl. "You and I've got some psyching to do on the subject of mothers and daughters one day."

Marais wished he'd quit whispering so long in her ear with Dan's eyes glooming at them over Mrs. Plover's pompadour. At last, however, Dan had her hand in his, was shaking it up and down in a most ridiculous fashion, was saying in a deep voice through which the feeling burst like bubbles from a pipe, "Good night, Marais. Pleased with my surprise? Hope you both rest well," With that haunting, wistful, cherishing look in his eyes that all at once broke the shell of ice around her heart, sending a flood of warmth through her whole body until she was happy and alive and filled with a wild desire to tweak the blob of hair out of his eyes, to take hold of

his ears, bring his face down to hers, and give him a resounding kiss right there before her mother.

At the door he let Gil go ahead and turned boldly back for a moment. "Are you glad to see me?" he asked her abruptly.

Her look must have given him the answer he wanted, for she heard him whistling madly until the crash of the Ford deafened the triumphant tune.

When Marais had swung out the wall bed, and her mother, having unpacked her suitcase and undressed modestly in the bathroom, had gone with polite excuses for her weariness to bed, the girl lay for a long time on the couch in silent, throbbing wakefulness. Dan was back, Dan was back! He had brought her mother to please her. Her mother was now within arm's length of her, breathing gently in her first tired sleep. To-morrow they'd go through the *Mirror* plant, and she would take her all over the university buildings and campus. A shame she'd never seen them. Young John would be going there one day and she'd want to know just where each of his classes was held. And Saturday was the football game. Her mother should wear the biggest chrysanthemum she could buy. Was she glad Dan had brought her? She hadn't faintly realized just how happy her mother's coming would make her. It was the beginning of a closer tie between them. She had been too rebellious, too hard. She was beginning to see it now. Well, it would be different after this. Dan, without knowing what he was about, had made the change possible. Of course it would be Dan. He could do anything. Finally she went to sleep like a child with her hand slipped peacefully beneath her flushed cheek.

If Marais thought her mother had won Gil the evening of her arrival, she was not prepared for the effect of her straight, courteous presence upon the boys at the office the next morning. After she had introduced Jimme and A. B. the Pup who seemed overcome by the fact that she should have a mother in the flesh, she was called into the composing room. She went, dogged by a faint feeling of apprehension at leaving the three together. Hard to associate her mother with A. B. the Pup and Jimmie. Suppose A. B. cracked one of his impossible jokes. He'd do it, too, if he hopped on to the fact that her mother was straight-laced. When she returned, however, the sight which met her astonished eyes relieved her mind of its doubts.

Mrs. Plover was seated between the two, her cheeks slightly flushed, her eyes turning alertly from one to the other while they entertained her with stories of their newspaper experiences which even Marais had never heard them tell.

"At two o'clock every morning a flock of rats as big as dogs run across Shattuck Avenue." A. B. the Pup's eyes behind their horn-rimmed glasses were widely solemn. "Only the night watchman and I can testify to that fact. That's what comes of doing night work on a newspaper."

Mrs. Plover nodded seriously. "My brother used to tell a pretty good story along that line," and she was off on one of Uncle Webb's best.

Then between spurts of work they must show her the plant, and afterwards take her to Bill-the-Dog-Man's where she sat between them on a high stool and ate ham and eggs and praised the cooking of

Bill with whom she exchanged her recipe for prune whip for his for beaten biscuits.

"A regular sport," was Jimmie's comment to Marais. "The most corking woman I ever met."

"You'll have to go hard to keep up with her, Marais, old girl," growled A. B. the Pup. "She can give you cards and spades."

And Marais smiled proudly, feeling somehow responsible for these excellent good points of her mother. Between the two of them there had been no word of the scene which Mrs. Plover and Dan had interrupted. When they were having their coffee that morning, Mrs. Plover in her neat tailor skirt and shirt waist, her pompadour built as firmly as if she were at that moment expecting company, Marais's blue corduroy dressing gown bringing out the green-gold sparks in her long, dark eyes and the chestnut lights in her hastily braided hair, the girl had waited shrinkingly for her mother's admonitory words. But not by the wink of an eyelash had she hinted she had seen anything out of the ordinary. For a time Marais had watched her, fearing that at a fatal moment she would set down her cup smartly on its saucer and the familiar words would pour forth in that dreaded, monitor's voice, "Marais, there's something I want to speak to you about." But she made no such beginning, and as the morning advanced and the fact more and more clearly forced itself upon her that her mother was going to relinquish the rôle of disciplinarian, and be merely her guest and friend, her step became lighter and her heart continued its happy song.

Her sense of release, her timid belief that this marked the beginning of a closer understanding be-

tween them, was strengthened by a brief conversation she had with the Chief late that afternoon. He had been telling Mrs. Plover something of his plans for the paper, talking to her, Marais verily believed from the look in his satyr eyes, of his private life, a subject sealed as the tomb. When Dan came to take her for a spin up in the Cragmont hills to see the sunset through the Golden Gate—Marais glowed proudly at the way she was handed from one person to another for entertainment, at the plans that were being made for every hour of her stay—Peter Harnett stopped the girl on her way to her desk.

“There goes one of the most interesting women it’s ever been my good fortune to meet.” He nodded toward the departing Ford. “Thoroughbred, pioneer stock, and the tact of a Madame Récamier. And great Cæsar, but she’s proud of you!”

Marais’s eyes opened incredulously.

“You should have seen her head go up when I told her something of your work and how you’re regarded around these parts. ‘Marais will always do her best. She’s a good girl,’ was all she said, and I could see it was hard for her to get that out. But from the look on her face she might as well have exclaimed, ‘She’s the most wonderful girl in the world.’ She’d die for you, child. Never forget that.”

Singing in her heart sure enough after that. All the rest of the afternoon. That night. A changed world.

But the happiest day was Saturday—the football day. The bright, splintering day of the Big Game, with the deep blue bending above a purple, shimmer-

ing bay, the brown-green hills standing sentinel over the snapping, brilliant world in which white gulls curved, circled, bent, dipped, and flashed away. The air electric with excitement. Couples, boys and girls, men and women wearing blue and yellow streamers or carrying cardinal banners, jostling each other good-naturedly off the sidewalks, crowding the eating places, surging slowly through the campus to the football field.

It turned out that only Marais, Mrs. Plover, Dan, and Gil were a part of the bright, slowly moving crowd. At the last minute Mrs. Dalrymple had been taken ill and Sydney and Berta had stayed with her. Marais was vaguely disturbed about Mrs. Dalrymple—that gray face and those haunted eyes—but she wasn't sorry the women hadn't come. Gil and her mother walked ahead, leaving her and Dan to follow as they would. In the flower-scented, laughing crush they were borne together—she felt Dan's arm move along her side—his hand pressed hers hard until the creases in her leather gloves bit into the flesh of her palm. She liked the small pain. It gave her an exquisite sensation. She dared not look into his eyes. She knew she would swoon in their rough tenderness. But she couldn't escape hearing him whisper, "Darling," and in her heart bells were ringing in tune with the flying banners, the gay voices, the rhythm of their bodies moving in unison up the sloping campus toward the gridiron where the rooters of the opposing colleges were already yelling in sharp, staccato barks, the bands were braying, and the green field marked conspicuously with white lay dramatically bare before thousands of eager eyes.

When they had taken their places high toward one end of the field and with nods and smiles had congratulated themselves on the view they had of the panorama, Marais fell to watching the tiny giants practicing kicking goals and running and tackling on the gridiron far below her. One of them had red hair like Young John's. Did her mother see the resemblance? Leaning forward, she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Plover between Dan and Gil, smiling animatedly at some drawling sally of the latter, looking down into the striped field, at the very boy Marais had picked out, her eyes following him as he sped to the end line with the ball. Her mother was thinking the same thoughts she was. Having the same impressions? A girl near her had on a raccoon coat, just the kind she had wanted for so long, a great mass of violets crushed against it as though in the throng she had been pressed suddenly close to some one. Happy, happy world! But this consciousness of color, of the bright, excited smell of things, of the moving silence of a vast number of people merged into a colossal unit in their common interest, of the possible adventure of one woman in a fur coat, the victory or failure of a boy with red hair, were merely an accompaniment to her deep, inner, secret happiness. She knew why she was happy. Watching her mother as she listened attentively to Dan's explanation of the game, she felt that for the first time she saw her as she really was. This smiling, handsome woman with no sharp edges on which people cut themselves till they bled was her own mother. Having found her she was never going to lose her again. The discovery was so precious that she tingled from head to foot in its knowledge.

And she'd found her through Dan who sat there beside her, talking indeed to her mother, but telling her by every gesture and every look that a current not to be stemmed was running through his veins. She felt it. She was carried on by it as she had been borne along by the crowd that afternoon, carried until her spirit mounted to the dazzling heavens, aware of the triumph of muscle, the glory of spirit, the sharp smell of rotting leaves in the brilliant fall sunshine, the wind through thick, sheltering trees, the laughter of happy people, the release of something heavy and anxious and longing in her breast, rising so free and strong that it could never know imprisonment again.

Ah, she knew that victory lay with their colors. At the end of the game she was singing, "Boola, boola," at the top of her lungs with the rest of them, laughing, crying, throwing her flowers into the air, while the blue and yellow throng poured its serpentine on the field and caps fell in a rainbow waterfall over the defeated goal posts.

Boola, boola, boola, boola,
Boola, boola, boola, boola,
Then we'll rough house old Stanford
Till she hollers, Boola, boo, rah, rah!

But though Gil and Dan urged them to finish the delirious day with a little supper at the Hotel Oakland—it would be fun to all pile into the Ford—Marais pleaded fatigue and the men were forced to see them to the apartment.

"This is no way," muttered Dan as he unlocked the door.

Marais stood her ground. "It seems hard-hearted

not to ask you in. But remember, this is my mother's last night with me, and I've scarcely seen her alone one moment," she told Gil, who replied, "It's my belief that she'd like to finish the day with a whoop and a bang." But Marais shook her head. Gil for all his worldly wisdom didn't know everything.

To Dan's query regarding Sydney's party she replied, "Yes, I'll be ready at eight sharp." What she meant was, "When you come that will be our first moment alone for how many weeks?"

Her mother and herself in the living-room, facing one another in the twilight—watching the stars pierce the rosy gloom; the silence a perfumed salve after the noise, the music, the yells of the afternoon—she felt like a lover wooing a young girl whom he had coaxed into a quiet, sequestered nook. All at once she was trembling for fear her mother would rather have gone to dinner with Gil and Dan than to sit across the gate-leg table from her over their chops and salad and toast. She leaned forward, searching Mrs. Plover's face, and was struck as she'd been the first time she saw her with the change in her appearance, the sharp hollows in her temples, the sunken corners of her mouth, the shriveled look of her whole person. If her mother should be ill, if she should lose her, now, just when she was beginning to find her— On a sudden Marais sprang to her feet and switched on the light.

"Mother, are you tired? Have we done too much?" Looking into the square countenance anxiously, she was glad to find that the gloom had been playing tricks. Her mother, cheeks flushed from

excitement and weariness, sat as wide awake as ever, her eyes bright, her lips in vigorous repose.

"Quit fussing, Marais. I'm all right." Her dry voice wasn't fatigued at all.

"Are you sorry we didn't go to supper with the boys?" Marais hung on the answer.

"It was better to come home." But the reply did not satisfy the girl whose sensitive ear believed it caught a regretful accent.

"I'm afraid you would rather have gone," she murmured. Somehow she had wanted this day to be perfect for her mother, every wish fulfilled, nothing left undone.

Mrs. Plover stopped her sentimentality with proper sharpness. "Don't be silly, Marais. Of course I'd rather come home. It isn't common sense to go ripping around all day and all night too."

"Well, you must sit right there and not stir while I get supper." Marais placed a cushion at her mother's back and flew into the kitchen.

Mrs. Plover was passively obedient, indeed seemed immersed in a train of thought throughout the meal. As she tasted the cream pie Marais had ordered, hoping it would please her particular taste, she remarked abruptly, "Marais, if anything should happen to me, I want you to see that Young John goes to college."

Again Marais had that rush of alarm. She opened her mouth, but her mother held up her hand peremptorily. "I don't mean that I'm going to die to-night or to-morrow. I'm as well as I've ever been in my life; but you never know what's going to happen. And being down here and seeing the campus and buildings and the students has made me

realize how much he'd get out of it. Abner'ud take him into the shoe store the minute he's out of high school. But he's smart and he ought to have the chance you had."

Never before had her mother involuntarily spoken of their problems as being joint ones. Marais's eagerness rose with a leap into her voice. "Of course, mother. I'd never thought of anything else. He can live with me and——"

Her glowing plans were interrupted by Mrs. Plover's crisp accents. "The place'll be clear again next month. You could sell it for a good, round price."

"Don't talk as if you weren't going to be here to see Young John through the university," broke in Marais. It was too ironical for her mother on the edge of their new relationship to be talking of dying as calmly as she did of her return to Oakleyville the next day.

"Marais, you always did let your imagination run away with you just like your Uncle Webb. Can't we discuss possibilities without going into heroics?"

Uncle Webb! "How about Uncle Webb? Have you heard anything?" Once she wouldn't have had the temerity to ask such a question.

"Not directly." Mrs. Plover clipped her words as she always did when her emotions were involved. "Jerg Robbins met a man in Portland this summer who said he'd seen some one exactly like Webb. Working in a grocery store in a little town in Washington. But when he asked him if his name wasn't Webb Haliburton, he said no, it was Bart Rupley. We'll never know, I guess."

"I guess not," echoed Marais. Her memories were too poignant for more words.

"I'm glad ma never realized the worst." Mrs. Plover's voice grew hard. "Going away with that woman."

Marais opened her lips, then closed them hard on the words which rushed to her tongue. She wasn't going to spoil their one evening by an argument. Not when her mother was talking to her as if she were her sister.

Mrs. Plover became reminiscent after that. Why, she was even speaking of her own father, of Marais's grandfather Haliburton. She was telling with pride thrilling through her voice how he—ordained a man of God—had with his own hands felled the oaks to build the cabin which housed him and his wife after their journey across the plains, how he had preached the first funeral in the little church, how as time went on people from the Coast Range foothills on their way to Sacramento came to make the Haliburton home in Oakleyville—the little, brown house with ragged sailors climbing all over it, and a Balm of Gilead tree at the side—a stopping place, of the year of the drouth when all the cattle died, of the founding of Parnassus College, its struggle for existence and how finally David Haliburton came forward and lifted with his own hard-saved money the mortgage it carried.

"I wonder if it was worth all the struggle and self-sacrifice," murmured Marais.

Her mother pushed back her half-finished piece of pie. "How can you say such a thing? He and ma both saw their duty and did it. What else was there for them to do?"

Nothing, of course. For, after all, that pioneering life held their recreation as well as their work. But wouldn't Uncle Webb's career have been different had there been less soul saving, less grinding work at home and more simple pleasure? Perhaps if grandmother had walked with him in the woods, told him the names of the flowers in the deep grass, had read to him when he was a little boy—but when had she moments for such luxuries? It had been a brave, dramatic time, but such a hard one—Marais's chin shuddered in her cupped hand.

When the dishes were washed and wiped and put away in the cupboard, Mrs. Plover insisting upon helping, she observed, "I believe I'll pack my things to-night. Then they'll be ready," and disappeared into the dressing-room.

Marais found herself surprisingly weary, but it was a happy weariness. When she crawled into bed, the sheets against her tired body gave her a luxurious sense of well-being. She doubted whether she had ever been so happy. One more night under her roof together. And soon she'd be going home to make a visit such as they'd never had. Her mother had accepted her. "Marais will always do her best," she had told the Chief. They were friends—would probably have been so long ago except for her own stubborn blindness. Pictures out of the past began to stream before her eyes—how beautiful she used to think her mother was when she went to church in a wine-colored satin skirt and a beaded, black velvet dolman her father had brought as a surprise from San Francisco—how she cried when Mrs. Plover came home after the service and took off those wonderful clothes. "Please, mamma, keep

them on. You're so beau-ful." She couldn't have been more than four. And once, about the same period when her father and mother and Uncle Webb had been sitting at the dinner table and Marais was leaning against her father's knee, Uncle Webb said something with that twinkle in his eye and her mother had laughed and thrown a piece of bread at him, and Marais had run to her, crying, "Please laugh that way again, mamma." "How?" Mrs. Plover had asked, surprised. "Like little ripples all over your face. It makes you so pretty." She remembered how they had all laughed until she was ready to cry for shame, and had hidden her head on her father's shoulder. The time of the "don't" and uplifted finger—how could her mother have been less than strict with so much responsibility suddenly upon her shoulders?—was to be forgotten in that earlier, joyous period and the new, happy stretch ahead of them.

The dressing-room door opened. Mrs. Plover in her plain, cotton nightgown buttoned to her throat came to the foot of the couch. There she paused, her eyes upon Marais's face. The girl knew she had something important to say. Without being conscious of it she shrank from the unborn words.

"Marais, before I go back to Oakleyville, there are some things I've got to say to you."

In the pause, just like the dramatic pauses in her mother's long-ago scoldings, Marais's fingers slowly buried themselves in the folds of the sheet. "If only she wouldn't speak, we could go on being happy together."

"I know you regard my advice as interference.

But after all, I am your mother. And that ought to make some difference. Are you listening?"

"Yes, mother." She didn't know how she managed it.

"I was never so mortified in my life as when Dan and I walked in here the other night and caught you dressed up like a—a fast woman and smoking with a strange man. Why, your very position, sprawling out that way on the couch, was a disgrace. How a daughter of mine could be guilty of such conduct is more than I can fathom."

Oh, oh, oh! All the golden happiness was rolling away so fast there wasn't a shred of it left. Marais lay there staring up at her mother, looming above her. And she had thought they were on the verge of becoming friends.

"I don't know how standards are in Berkeley," went on the inexorable voice, "but if you did things like that in Oakleyville, you'd be talked about all the rest of your life. This Sommer-in-dyke seems a pleasant enough person. But he's too smart for an ignorant girl like you. I'm seldom wrong in judging folks. You remember I was right about Preston Marbury. I knew from the turn loose that he was no good. My advice, if it's worth anything, is to let Mr. Sommer-in-dyke alone before you get your fingers burned. He'll take everything and give as little as possible. Then one fine day you'll find you're left high and dry. What you ought to do is to get married. Look at Jaquith. She's got a good man, a nice home, and three splendid children. What woman could want more? Times may have changed, but I don't believe you could do better than to marry Dan and settle down. And you'd better

do it while getting's good. Let me tell you if you go on at the rate you're going, fooling with Tom, Dick, and Harry, in a little while no decent man'll want to marry you. Goodness knows I've tried to instill right principles into you. But you don't seem to remember hide nor hair of them. I'll never have another minute's peace about you as long as I live. I shudder to think what'll become of you."

"Mother!"

At the smothered ejaculation Mrs. Plover paused. "Well, that's all, anyway. You'll do as you please, but I've said my say. Good night." She turned away, snapped the light off, and climbed into the folding bed.

For a long time Marais lay rigid. Finally the tears began to run out of her eyes and drop on the pillow with such loud thuds that she feared her mother could hear. "I'd die before I'd let her know I'm crying." Then her throat commenced to swell, her breathing became spasmodic, and she knew the next moment she would be sobbing if she couldn't think of something to distract her attention. "Little fool, think of anything instead of being so sorry for yourself." But her mind was a blank. In desperation she began to rattle off lines of poems she'd learned with her English classes. First a fragment from "Tam O'Shanter":

But to our tale;—Ae market night,
Tam had got planted unco right,
Fast by an ingle, bleezing finely—finely . . .

She couldn't remember any more of that one. But there were others. That weird thing by Keats:

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering? . . .

That she said to the end, but her breath still bubbled from her throat. She set her teeth and dashed into her favorite, Shelley:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear!
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! . . .

Thus she kept repeating lines at random till at last the sobs were throttled. But into the blank of her mind flowed stark misery, the helplessness of one whose innermost reserves have been violated, whose loveliest dreams have been shattered. With her eyes tightly closed she began to pray: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Oh, where are they? "He leadeth me beside the still waters." If I had prayed oftener, it wouldn't be so hard now. "He restoreth my soul." Could He restore anything so bruised? "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—" That was what she was walking through now, the shadow of death. "I will fear no evil." But I do fear evil. I fear it horribly. "For Thou art with me." Could anybody rest really in that promise? "Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." Comfort was the best word she'd said. She needed it. How she needed it!

She stayed awake thus all night.

CHAPTER VIII

REVELRY

WHEN Marais opened the door for Dan the night of Sydney's party, he paused on the threshold, blinking at her as though she were the sun. The sight of her was enough to dazzle the eyes of a cooler-headed chap than Dan. Her black, sleeveless gown fell from her white shoulders, clothing the long lines of her slim, strong body in its glimmering sheath. In the bronze lights of her hair wound coronet fashion about her small head, shone a crescent of brilliants Sydney had brought her from New York. The subdued glow apparent in her since she and Dan had stood together on the path in the Berkeley hills had bloomed to-night into a lovely radiance reflected in the misty luster of her eyes and the scarlet of her mouth rich as a ripe pomegranate fruit.

He stumbled a little, his rough-blocked face quivering with a startled joy. In a second, however, even as his gaze took her breath, he had recovered himself, in one stride was in front of her, had swept her into his arms. Melted was the fog that surrounds every person on this earth, lost the misunderstandings of their youth, the barrier of her pride. They were one, the hidden heart of the world, the pulse of life, the creator through which it flows in its eternal round.

Finally, her lips, her face, her hands, her body

burning with their new abundance of life, Marais pulled herself away from his clasp. "Just look what you've done to my hair." She managed to laugh tremulously, made a face at him, and ran into the dressing-room.

When she returned with her wraps on he was still standing in the middle of the floor. She was ashamed of her trivial behavior—her only guard against being borne away completely on the tide of her feeling—when she saw the tears on his thick lashes. He did not touch her again. But seated on the outside of the ferryboat, the dark water swishing about them like mysteriously tearing silk, the myriad lights on the San Francisco hills winking an invitation, he leaned toward her and whispered, "You're mine, Marais. No matter what comes, you're mine. You know it now, don't you? After the party we'll plan."

Marais pondered the phrase silently, her eyes following the light-splashed trail of a shining ferryboat plying toward Oakland. "I know I belong to him. There's no question about it. Mother was right in that. Why does he speak as though the fact needs signing and sealing for safekeeping? Can he think I'm interested in Gil? No, it's something else. Deeper. I don't know what. But why worry? Everything's settled anyway. To-night, when we come home"—but her thought refused to picture their planning, Dan's leave-taking.

The Dalrymple home overlooking the forlorn Panama-Pacific Exposition grounds was a tall Gothic structure with a face of plaster and wood crossed diagonally by a flight of stone steps. As a lofty-looking manservant opened the solid oaken

door for Marais and Dan, and an immaculately fluted, black and white maid ushered the girl into Sydney's bedroom to take off her things, she recalled that John Wentworth had grudgingly bought this place for his daughter and Sydney some years ago. Evidently—her eyes took in the Chinese rug, the tapestry and etchings on the pale, satin-finished walls, the rare, old rosewood furniture, the pile of brocade on the day bed—he had maintained it in expensive pride ever since. All for Sydney. Why didn't she play a straighter game with him?

Marais, pausing before the low dresser to push in a rebellious hairpin and powder her nose, caught sight among the shining, silver brushes and toilet articles of the framed picture of a young man with tossed hair and petulant mouth. Quent Waynor. She looked accusingly into the deep, dreaming eyes. "Why aren't you here to look after Sydney? Why don't you make her marry you?"

A sound, a dragging footfall turned her sharply about. Mrs. Dalrymple stood on the threshold, staring at her with wide, half-vacant eyes out of a face chalk white. Those eyes—Marais could not return their empty, harried stare. And her face—it had shrunk to half its normal size. Her figure in its gray, trailing chiffon dress sagged as small and slight as that of a young child. For a fleeting moment it recalled to Marais her first impression of her mother's shriveled looks. She ran toward Mrs. Dalrymple.

"How are you, dear lady?" she cried. "When I rang up, Sydney said you were better."

The woman clung to the doorpost. "I am." She

panted in the effort to speak. "Only my head feels a little peculiar when I move too quickly."

"But why are you up?" Marais's concern grew as she saw how ill Mrs. Dalrymple really was.

The mother spoke rapidly. "Sydney begged me not to dress. But I thought some older person ought to appear. It looks better. Her grandfather is so old-fashioned about those things."

"Well, let me take you to your room now." Marais led her down the hall, noticing how her skeleton hand moved along the wall for support? Did Sydney realize how ill she was? "Maybe after a while you can come downstairs."

"Look after Sydney, Marais." From the door the girl turned at the unconsciously pleading cry. The deepened shadows of the haunted face gave its mouth the look of a dog. "You will, won't you?" With a sob she ran back and took Mrs. Dalrymple in her arms. She might have been sheltering her own mother from all the sorrows that women have to bear.

In the drawing-room Sydney in a robe of floating iridescence like a misted rainbow and with a sapphire-encrusted bandeau clasping her golden love-locks, came forward to meet Dan and Marais. Back of her strolled Preston Marbury with whom she had been engaged in talk. He was too clever to intrude upon this group, would cover up his tracks so that one felt one's own offense in return with a stiff, reluctant bow his candid, charming smile.

"I was just saying to Preston I didn't believe you were coming." Sydney threw the young man a meaning glance which said, "In a few minutes we can go on talking. I'm crazy to get back to you."

Her eyes were more hectically bright, her cheeks a deeper scarlet than Marais had ever seen them. "Just talk to whomever you like. Liberty Hall, you know."

She offered in one inclusive sweep the roomful of people, chatting, lounging, and smoking in groups. "I haven't insulted my guests by forcing on them any specific entertainment. They're here—the whole range of human experience possible to them—to you." Her laugh was loudly strident.

Marais looked at her, frankly puzzled. She noticed that Dan was making no response to Sydney's remarks. His face had that locked, dogged look it always wore when she was about.

"You'll find all sorts of interesting people here," Sydney went on. "That man over there in the gray suit next to Leda Walters, the etcher, is Doorly Parks. He's written those thrilling things about the South Seas. Preston and he have been so thick that I'm almost minus a suitor." Another look at the young man in the shadow. "That chap talking to Berta is the radical lawyer who's making such a stir with his speeches. If he weren't a Socialist, he'd have come into his own long ago. You must know him, Dan. Bolt Harper."

Sydney nodded toward a stout, grizzled man in a white sweater which rolled thickly about his throat, seated close to Berta Holmes, his hand running idly up and down her bare arm as he talked to her.

"Yes," observed Dan dryly. "I know Harper."

At that moment Gil Sommer-in-dyke sauntered up as casual in his evening clothes as in his old brown tweeds. With a laugh Sydney gave Marais's arm

a little pinch. "Oh, oh, here's some one to look after you," she murmured.

Dan's quick frown did not escape Marais. She greeted the novelist with unusual warmth. "Hello, Gil. Surely. I'd like nothing better than a chat." Really, Dan shouldn't behave like a child.

"Well," Gil surveyed her as they seated themselves on a divan, "you haven't failed any in looks."

Marais flushed. She liked his occasional bluntness better than his subtleties. Not wise, though, to show him her pleasure. Lifting her shoulders, she glanced at the room whose proportions loomed majestically in the suave light of many candles. At one end bloomed the great window dimly rich toned. Above the stone fireplace stood an armored knight in his niche and opposite the window stretched a dais reached by three shallow steps above which extended a carved balcony. Back of the dais doors opened on a glimpse of terraced garden where couples moved beneath soft, lanterned lights.

"Beautiful room," murmured she presently. "Anything might happen here. Anything fine or terrible."

Gil offered her a cigarette. "Admirable place for a party."

Through the haze of smoke Marais contemplated the crowd. There was something odd about it. Of course Sydney would draw into this splendid room an unusual group of people. But these were unusual in a hit-and-miss fashion. Some of the women wore evening gowns, some sport skirts, one girl was in knickers. The men varied from dinner coats to smoking jackets. People drifted about. Whispered with their heads together. Burst into loud laugh-

ter. Disappeared into the dim library where a swarm seemed to have congregated. Marais didn't know that drinks were being served there until Gil brought her a bubble goblet in which shone some amber liquid.

"Berta's going to favor us," said he, leaning over her, and Marais, her lips touching the delicate fluid, saw the man Bolt Harper lead Sydney's panther friend to the grand piano. If she had not caught Dan's disapproving eyes over the rim of her glass, she wouldn't have tipped it bottom up. Wasn't he handsome, though, looming there darkly in the hall? She'd never seen him look as he did to-night, beneath his cold air of distaste still that tender glitter from their moment together.

Berta had begun to sing. She stood there, swaying slightly in her green velvet gown, the light braiding the string of topaz gems about her neck with yellow fire which seemed at the same time to pour itself from her throat. Her eyes were on Bolt Harper. To him she sent the naked, golden message of her song. Marais was not familiar with the selection. The rough accents of the words, which she believed to be Gaelic, blent admirably with the deep voice and accentuated the passion weighting every note. No spoken word could have conveyed so clearly an invitation as did the open desire of those hot, sobbing tones. Marais hoped no one else had seen what she had seen. Or had it been merely her imagination? Singers were supposed to throw emotion into their music? Then suddenly, through the hushed crowd, in the hall doorway, Dan's face again, cold, revolted. Marais blew a line of smoke

straight before her to blot it out. Why make things seem worse than they were?

At the end of the song Gil was at her shoulder with her glass freshly filled. "Happy days." He silenced her protest, touching with his her lifted goblet.

Marais, still conscious of Dan's eyes, drained it.

"Sorry you didn't like Berta's song," drawled Gil. "Now I did."

"How do you know I didn't?"

"Your lovely, telltale face, Russet Locks. Might as well have spoken up in meeting. 'A noble voice, but a shameless woman.' Oh, you were properly shocked. No doubt of that. Confess."

Marais laughed and shook her head.

"Then, if you refuse that, 'Let me take you walking in the garden,' " he hummed plaintively. "I want to talk to you, and I promise not to finish the song." He drew her arm through his possessively.

As they mounted the dais and passed through the glass doors, Sommer-in-dyke caught up from a chair a black scarf splashed with gold and folded it carefully over her shoulders. "Another shaft in the quiver of my goddess," he murmured, giving her a glance which Marais decided not to understand.

They moved along the flagged walk in silence. "I'm glad you asked me to come out here." Her eye ran lightly over the garden, a quaintly charming place sheltered by high walls from wind and the drifting San Francisco mists. Irregular stepping-stones led down various grassy ways which lost themselves in clumped shrubbery.

"Yes, you would like it." Sommer-in-dyke looked lingeringly from her to a couple passing them

on a distant path, the woman clinging to her companion's arm, chatting feverishly. As an Arabian lantern ensnared the radiance of Sydney's uncovered head and splendid gown beside Preston Marbury's compactness, Gil nodded in their direction. "Isn't she a wonder to-night?"

"Lovely," responded Marais warmly.

Gil went on heartily: "Good old Syd. What she doesn't do for us. Scolds us, cooks for us, fights for us, hauls in people she thinks we ought to meet. She's a real person in New York. Everybody gets to her place sooner or later. Know Quent?"

Marais shook her head mutely.

"Interesting chap. You'll have to come to New York to see them."

She remained silent. Gil looked at her keenly. He drew a shade closer, his fine brow wrinkling. "Why take life so intensely, Marais? Let every fellow be a law to himself. Be one yourself. It's the only way, on my word." An unwonted seriousness in his voice made her look up quickly. Even in the gloom she could see the tenderness in his brown eyes.

"Do you live by your recipe?" she asked lightly.

"As far as I can." He was still looking at her.

"Then I must take it under consideration."

"Do," he laughed. "Perhaps following your reflection you'll let me sing the last line of my song to you."

"What is it? Just by way of information."

"Here's the whole ditty."

"If I take you walking in the garden,
If I kiss you must I ask your pardon?"

At her silence he murmured apologetically, "I never could carry a tune." Then he caught her hand with a sudden, swift pressure. "Oh, you delectable Diana. Why do you tantalize me so?"

"Look, we're at the end of the trail." Marais broke from him and ran to a stone basin which received a crystal stream from a lion's mouth.

Suddenly she stiffened. In the shadow of a big hydrangea bush two persons stood clasped as one. As if her eyes unsealed the charm which held them motionless, they drew silently apart. Then Sydney's laugh rippled out. "That you, Marais? Who's with you?"

"Gil," returned Marais awkwardly. "That is, if he hasn't fallen into the fountain."

"Gil," called Sydney abruptly, her voice deadened by a burst of loud talking from the drawing-room. "Gil, what are you doing?"

"Thinking of you and getting my feet wet." Sommer-in-dyke emerged plaintively from the darkness.

Another flood of noise from the house, a crash of breaking glass, and a raucous voice calling, "Where's Sydney? I want Sydney."

"Save the pieces. I'm coming," returned Sydney, stooping down. Then she groaned. "Go straight in and change those socks, Gil. You'll catch your death of cold."

Just before they reached the lighted doorway a gray, uncertain figure detached itself from the shadows by the porch and Marais caught her under lip sharply at sight of Mrs. Dalrymple's ashen face. "Sydney," she panted. "Sydney——"

Sydney halted quickly. "What is it, mother? Are you ill?"

"No—but there's so much noise— I'm afraid the neighbors——"

"How many times have I told you to quit worrying about nothing. You'll never get well that way." Sydney's voice was like that of a harassed mother. "Come, I'll take you to your room."

She led her mother away into the darkness, the thin thread of Mrs. Dalrymple's protests still audible above her remonstrances. "I'm afraid Sydney. I have such a heavy feeling over my heart. I can hardly breathe——"

Marais was glad to lose the edge of the frightened wail, the sight of those clinging eyes, to leave Preston Marbury back of her in the darkness, for the friendly, lighted room where Dan must be. Gone was her momentary vexation at his unreasonable gloom. "He's the one I can depend upon. I want to feel his arms around me again. I want to tell him all about what's happened. I hope he's the first person I see."

But he wasn't. Quite a different figure held the center of the floor—Berta Holmes, flushed, threatening, unsteady, her hair wisping about her bloodshot eyes. A disordered, unpleasant figure.

"Where's Sydney?" she demanded of the room. "I've been calling her for an hour."

"She'll be here in a minute, Berta." Gil's calm voice came over Marais's shoulder.

The woman looked at him with dull hatred. "Who asked you to butt in? I want Sydney."

"Coming, Berta." Sydney's heels tapped down

the stairs. The crowd about the doorway parted to let her pass.

Berta Holmes walked up to her, lurching slightly as she paused, her hands on her hips. "Syd, I'll say some of your California friends have no finesse."

"Why, how's that?" Although Sydney was forcing herself to be casual, Marais could tell she was nervously conscious of the curious eyes.

"Ask your little radical over there." She nodded menacingly to where Bolt Harper leaned in affected nonchalance against the library door.

With a smothered exclamation Gil started forward, but Sydney shrugged him back. Such scenes were probably not uncommon in this woman's career.

"When I told him I was tired and wanted to go into the garden, he asked me about the sleeping arrangements of your upper floors. Crude work, I call it," she sneered. "If people can't be subtle in their technique, they needn't play around with me. Get that?" She stared around the room, including the whole group in her question.

As she swayed dangerously, Gil stepped to her side, taking her arm.

"Let me alone." She jerked away from his touch. "Didn't I tell you days ago never to lay the weight of your hand on me again? Men are beasts." She began to sob violently, her hair falling about her neck.

Sydney put her arm about the heaving shoulders. "You're tired out. Come go upstairs like a good girl, and I'll take that trip to Honolulu with you. That's a bargain. Come on."

The woman ceased weeping, an ugly look sagging

one corner of her mouth. "You better go back to New York and see what Quent's up to. You poor fish."

"Berta." With a strength which Marais had not dreamed he possesses Gil picked the woman up bodily and started for the stairs.

The girl closed her eyes against the picture, the kicking, screaming singer, her features distorted, her voice breaking in a flood of oaths, Sydney's blanched efforts at indifference, Gil's face from forehead to chin set in a stern impassiveness. The mere fact of her shut lids could not keep out the disheveled vision, certainly could not silence the harsh foulness of the words. All at once, with her eyelids still lowered tight against the ugliness outside them, she was conscious of another element injected into the situation, of a closing door, a stir, a murmur through the room, Sydney's voice and another one—a man's tones, thin, astonished, muffled as if with rage.

She opened her eyes. John Wentworth stood there in the hall in hat and overcoat, his traveling bag still in his hand, staring at Gil and his writhing, screaming burden on the stairs, facing Sydney's white defiance. If the singer's features were bloated, his bulged unrecognizably in their purple torment. Sydney returned him look for look, her head well up, but Marais saw that the hand on the newel post was holding with all its might to the carved wood. He looked as if he was going to kill her, standing there, his pride forcing him to hold his tongue before her guests, to the point of bursting. He who had indulged her every whim, was now ready to strike her down for the results. The dreadful old man. Sydney, Sydney! Marais's heart sud-

denly overflowed with unreasoning tenderness for her friend. But she dared not come between the two.

John Wentworth made a step toward the drawing-room, toward his granddaughter. Every way he was balked. Marais could see in crimson words on the wall the thoughts which seethed through his mind: "Can't open my mouth in this house I've bought and keep up with my own good money for your drunken parties. You hussy. Well, we'll see about this. I said you'd go too far, and by God, you have!" He strode by her, his gesture a whistling whip on her tender flesh, and mounted the stairs heavily.

That lonely figure beside the newel post. Marais could not take her eyes from its pitiful radiance. "Oh, my dear, how like Uncle Webb you are at this moment. That reckless, backward toss of your head, the restless, caged look in your eyes. All over again. Don't go too far, Sydney. I love you. I love you. As I loved him."

Marais started toward the door. Now she could go to her friend. Could obey Mrs. Dalrymple's pleading, "Look after Sydney, Marais." Sydney saw her too. Her eyes brightened. She held out her hands. But just then Marais felt a staying touch on her arm, a voice spoke her name. "Are you ready to go?" She looked up. Dan was at her elbow, his face quite colorless, his mouth a heavy line above his thrust-out jaw.

At his words Sydney ran forward. "Why, it's only midnight, Mr. Sobersides. The party's just begun," she protested with valiant gayety. Sydney

would face death with a swagger, but Marais saw in her eyes a mortal pleading.

Dan's face became, if possible, more rigid. "We've just time for the last boat."

"Then stay all night, Marais. If you go now, you'll miss the best part of the fun." She clung to her friend's arm. "Stay if you love me. I need you." Marais could hear the wild heart beating under the glittering bodice.

The girl met Dan's stern eye, and her hand on Sydney's arm tightened. "What boat can I catch in the morning?"

"Oh, you darling." Sydney flung her arms about Marais's neck. "I'll drive you myself to the eight o'clock boat. Come on, Doorly's going to tell us——"

"Sorry," Dan's voice broke in firmly, "but Marais has to work to-morrow. She must get home to-night."

His face might have been blocked from stone. Marais's own seemed to reflect its implacability. "If Sydney wants me to stay, I'm going to," she said.

"There, Dan, how's that for the independent female?" flashed Sydney triumphantly.

But Gil Sommer-in-dyke, who had come downstairs, slipped his hand through her arm. "Stillman's right, Syd. All-night parties are no good for busy folks. Marais must go home."

Something in the conclusive quietness of his tone dispelled Marais's stubborn intention to thwart Dan's attempt at authority. Without a word she started upstairs, conscious of his dashed resentment at her quick obedience to Gil's words, when she had

disregarded so completely his wishes. On the steps she stumbled over an object and would have fallen but for Dan's hand.

"What's that?" she whispered, drawing in her breath.

"Oh, just one of Sydney's guests, sleeping off the party."

Her blood rose to the sneer in his tone. "Sydney can't help it if people make beasts of themselves," she retorted.

Not a word was spoken on the ferryboat. The cool air soothed Marais's cheeks but couldn't quiet the tumult of her thoughts. Dan sat with his arms folded, looking straight before him as though he would never take his frowning gaze from the gleaming Oakland shore line.

Once in the apartment the cloud seemed lifted from his thoughts. "Well," he sighed with grim satisfaction, "that's over."

Marais had become aware of the weariness which weighted her body. Oh, why didn't Dan take her in his arms without a word? Why should they ever mention this horrible night? As he spoke, however, she stiffened. "Over?" She lifted her chin in unconscious challenge.

"I mean we're forever free from a repetition of to-night's performance. Oh, Marais—" His voice deepened as he took her in his arms.

But his words had sent the blood tingling from her heart to her temples. She felt its surge. "Why, Dan?" she demanded.

He lowered his lips to the white triangle just beneath her ear. "You don't mean you want to have anything more to do with those people."

Her eyes hardened. With her hands on his breast she held him back. "If you think I'm going to cut Sydney, you're mistaken. Sydney is my friend. And I don't feel about the others as you do."

His arms slackened their hold while his mouth took its forbidding line. "I suppose you like the way they conducted things to-night."

"No." Marais flushed beneath the sarcasm of his tone. "I don't. But to-night isn't a fair sample. Those people are interested in real things. Truly they are." How was she going to make him see? "Plays—books—music. In some ways they have a really fine sense of freedom."

"Yes, they have." Dan's scorn was withering. "Making indecent proposals. Talking vilely. Drinking like fish. Freedom! Why, you don't know what you're talking about."

Her eyes flashed. "I might say the same of you."

"Well, I've had a little more experience than you have."

"Not enough to keep you from being hopelessly narrow-minded."

"I'll admit I haven't had Sommer-in-dyke's advantages. But then we can't all be geniuses."

Marais's head went up. The sudden movement made the pain already throbbing in her temples cleave a hot path to her neck. But she looked at him with cold steadiness. "It is a relief to be with Gil. He's a rare person," she said slowly. Let Dan question her taste in her friends if he wished. She'd show him where she stood.

Like a slash across her defiant pride came his muttered words, "That's what I've been afraid of."

"What?" she asked him haughtily.

"That we can never look at some things alike——"

So—he was disappointed in her. All the time he was glowering in the hall at Sydney's party, he'd been deciding her standards weren't his.

"Take Sydney Dalrymple," he went on. "She's a bad actress from start to finish. And you've never seen it. All this business about keeping her own name and running around with other men is preposterous. She might as well be unmarried."

If he knew the whole truth about Sydney, that horrid judge's look in his eyes, how it would deepen.

"I suppose you think, 'Birds of a feather,' " she laughed recklessly.

"I didn't say so."

"No, but you thought it. Just as you think a lot of other things in your self-righteousness. Well, let me tell you what I think. I'd rather Sydney would be a woman of the streets and big and generous as she is, than a—a pharisee——"

"Marais—don't——"

Dan, Dan, why do you stand there with that look just like my mother in your eyes and her awful 'don't' voice? Do you want to kill the something in me that's fighting for life?

"—Like you."

His eyes blackened with anger. "I'm glad to know your estimate of me."

"That's what it is." She wanted savagely to hurt him even while despising herself for her desire.

Black waters surged up about her. It was hopeless. But sternly she restrained her impulse to lift her hands and cover her twitching face. Oh, it might

have been so different. "And what's more, I never want to see you again."

"Marais—don't——"

"Go—please."

"God! Marais, you don't mean it."

She steadied herself against the break in his voice. He was in league with all the invisible forces trying to drive her back to fear and darkness.

"Yes—now."

The door closed. She looked up. This was the room where she and Dan were to have discussed their marriage plans.

Gil had told her once that she would argue herself out of heaven. Well, she had. She began to shake. Oh, Dan I've lost you altogether this time.

PART FOUR
CHANGE (1911—1912)

CHAPTER I

THE ELECTION

It was a lucky thing that the affairs of the *Mirror* claimed Marais's feverishly busy attention in the days which followed. Better for her to throw herself into the fight between the newspaper and the forces opposed to the city ownership of street railways than to fall into a dumb silence, as she did at times, shadows slipping ceaselessly over her pale face, a tortured line working its way between her level brows; better to discover, conscience-stricken at her own ignorance, how far the struggle had gone against the Chief who had hammered vainly with his editorials against the wall of silence erected by the *Journal*, the mouthpiece of those fighting the big issue; better than to shrink every time her apartment telephone rang for fear it was Dan again pleading to see her, or to listen to his heavy step retreating from her shut door while she sat within, her limbs vibrating to the thud of her heart.

But one noontime, a week before election day, as she sat on her couch staring at the door outside of which she knew he knocked in dogged persistence, the thin panels vanished, and there was his face, haggard and beseeching. Its appeal tore at her heart so that she sobbed out loud and held her breath for fear he had heard. The living-room was vacant, yet she couldn't thrust out the drawn whiteness of

Dan's mouth, his suffering forehead beneath its fall of hair, his asking eyes. She was fiercely glad to listen again to the mocking voice in her breast which had been hushed for a little while by her interest in the intense situation at the office. "You said you wanted freedom above everything in the world. Well, now you've got it. And you're not satisfied. You don't sleep nights. Your head roars as if an ocean were beating against your eardrums. Your heart is heavy as lead. Yet you know you and Dan can never be happy together. He thinks he loves you, but he'd crush you to death. You've decided it finally. Forget that look in his eyes." Its jibes became impossible to bear, and as soon as there was silence in the hall she put on her hat and went back to the office to join in the groans of Jimmie and A. B. the Pup at the swelling strength of the ring of politicians and merchants fighting the proposed change, and the Chief's blindness in believing he would be supported by the great body of voters on election day.

"He knows the *Mirror* can't carry on without more ads," growled A. B., glancing with unhappy eyes from the Chief's closed door to Marais's intent face where youth seemed to have been chiseled into a shadowed maturity. "Yet he persists in making the merchants on Shattuck Avenue as sore as goats by his highbrow policy. If funds are running low, he's taking a queer way of filling his coffers—cutting his own throat and letting us all down at the same time. Hell!"

Jimmie stalked in on the word. "Hell, sure enough." He flung into a corner his gray fedora

which he had for days worn as a gesture of defiance. "Linforth's cut us out."

Marais took one look at his expressive back. "What reason did he give?" she asked.

"None. It wasn't necessary. The others that have been tagging after him'll take the tip to-morrow." Jimmie's voice grated roughly as he banged into his seat and began to thump his typewriter till it quivered and jumped like a live thing beneath his fingers.

"He might damned well have steered a middle course. Wouldn't have touched his precious principles, and might have saved the *Mirror's* skin," muttered A. B.

"You two talk as though the election's already lost," Marais sniffed loftily. "Just wait and see."

But in her heart she knew the blow Linforth's withdrawal would deal to the Chief's campaign. The leading merchant of Berkeley assisting the newspaper with half-page, even full-page ads—in keeping with his stunt of being the town's benefactor—suddenly going out, leaving the pages of the *Mirror* looking more sparsely sprinkled with ads than before. The sheep would all huddle after their leader. The slender, grudging ads would disappear from the *Mirror*. The public would begin to wonder, to ask questions, to find out that Harnett was a badly balanced sort, not fit to run a paper. Oh, she'd been in the newspaper game long enough to know just how such a maneuver would react on the community.

Well, there was one week left. She'd work as she never had before. She had nothing to keep her from throwing her whole time and energy into the fight.

Sydney she hadn't seen since the party. Her mother's continued illness served as her excuse over the telephone. Her strained voice indicated she was still hurt because Marais hadn't stayed with her the night of the party. But the girl was willing to take her explanation at its surface value. Just now she found it too hard to face Sydney's restlessly searching eyes. No, Marais was glad the decks were cleared for stiff, engrossing work. There was nothing like it as a protection against thinking. Yes, thank God for work—her work—on the *Mirror*. And now that to be endangered. Marais's cheeks whitened at the thought and the shadows beneath her eyes became purple smudges. Her head raised itself sturdily. It was on the *Mirror* that she had found herself. She'd fight for it till the last ditch, was glad to have the lust of battle in her nostrils. Only seven days. She'd pack into them the work of seven months.

Even seven days can slide by like a flash, especially if each of their precious moments is tied up in committee meetings, conferences with club presidents, eager speeches about progressive journalism before groups of society women. Without consulting any one Marais had started out on her own tack. So hard did she push her splendid vitality that she woke on the morning of election day feeling that her body and her mind must be black and blue. Only for a moment, however. The electric suspense in the air, the knowledge that by ten o'clock that night enough precincts would be heard from practically to determine the result—Jimmie had told her that would be the way of it—all this was sufficient to set

your blood pounding in your veins and keep you tiptoeing on the verge of a climax all day.

And yet when she swung down the Virginia Street hill that eventful morning, her chief feeling was one of surprise that something as vital as election day should leave her so apathetic. Even the draped automobiles dashing about from early morning till late afternoon to the pools, the unusual knots of people giving Shattuck Avenue the appearance of circus day, the gay banners strung from one side of the street to the other, bands playing on the opposite corners, and anxious men and women trailing in and out of the *Mirror* office all day long, failed to thrill her with a sense of the immediacy of the election's result. Not until the Chief—singularly exalted, his dark face and slanting eyes irradiated by a kind of inner glow—suggested that the staff await the returns at the office after dinner, did she realize that it was five o'clock of the fateful afternoon, and their destiny was fairly upon them.

By nine o'clock everybody had straggled in, careless on the surface, underneath sharply, constrainedly intent. At ten o'clock A. B. the Pup and Jimmie brought in thick cups of coffee and a huge platter of doughnuts from Bill-the-Dog-Man's and the group gathered in a circle about the mottled mantelpiece. They were glad to draw closer. It was a sign of their kinship in the struggle.

Marais was in the act of returning A. B.'s wink through a doughnut when a br-r-r of the telephone bell held her eyes wide open and paralyzed his gesture. He took down the receiver. "Hello," he said. "What's that?"

A moment of silence broken only by the rattle of the Chief's paper beneath his coffee cup.

"A little early for the final report, isn't it?" asked A. B. huskily.

Peter Harnett rose. "What is it, A. B.?"

"You take the phone, sir." The boy slid from the chair.

The Chief sat down, his satyr's face serene. Marais looked at him, amazed. How could he be composed when so much was at stake? Her heart, so quiet all day, had begun to beat chokingly. "Well, what's the latest?" His voice was quite steady.

A brief silence during which the girl watched A. B.'s face, dead white beneath its raven thatch. Defeat. That's what it meant. Defeat for the *Mirror*. She began to sketch wild, triumphal arches all over her scratch pad. She would not—she would not believe it.

"Good." The Chief nodded in quiet satisfaction. "I knew it. Thanks for the news." He hung the receiver back on the hook with careful precision. Then he rose, including the whole group in his shining look. "We've won." His voice expanded with each word. "And our victory's due to the way you have worked. You've made the *Mirror* safe. Great, isn't it?"

Strangely enough nobody found anything to reply.

"I'm going to headquarters just to verify the report," added the Chief.

His high smile, the mounded shadows, the yellow smoke, the men's serious faces ran together in a blur before Marais's eyes. The paper was saved, after all. They could go on.

"Good Lord!" muttered A. B. the Pup, slumping limply into his chair as the door closed on Peter Harnett. "Good Lord!"

"What's the matter?" Marais sat up sharply.

"Hell, what's biting you?" Jimmie wheeled about, all nervous tension.

A. B. the Pup passed his hand over his smooth head. "I—I don't know. Off my nut, I guess. Chap said the fight was lost. Sure as shootin'. Cross my heart to die."

Jimmie scowled at him, his blue eyes shooting sparks of scorn. "College education, that's what's done it." Supreme disgust was in his finger pointed to his forehead.

"Damn it all! I know what I heard," A. B. burst out indignantly. "He said. 'The fight has gone against you fellows.' And that's that."

Marais hung on their words. Inside her head clicked the sentences: "The paper is lost. I knew it all the time. What else could happen?" Suddenly she raised her head. "Sh-h! Here he comes."

The door opened and the Chief entered alone. All the living fire which had illumined his smile was snuffed out. At sight of his face shriveled gray as ashes Marais's sympathy flooded to him wordlessly.

"A silly mistake on my part," he said slowly. "It seems we've lost out. I could have sworn McCarter said we'd won." He moistened his lips.

A. B. the Pup stooped and placed a fresh piece of coal on the already replenished fire. In the stillness the flame bit at its coating of coal dust with snapping teeth.

Marais cleared her throat. "A little early to know yet, isn't it?"

Harnett shook his head slowly. "The uncertain precincts have already been heard from. No, we're clean beaten."

"And that's that," growled A. B. the Pup as if glad to have a holdover from his last speech to cling to.

"Believe I'll go over to the shop," said the Chief after awhile.

Marais knew he wanted to put on his overalls, and sit before his linotype. There in the surroundings in which he felt most at home he would stare at the wall, trying to readjust himself to this new and to him unforeseen condition. With the boys present she couldn't say anything, but she ached to put her arms around him and draw his poor, ugly, tired head to her shoulder.

"Shall I go with you, sir?" She could have blessed Jimmie for his gentleness.

"No, thank you, Jimmie." The door closed once more behind him. The lonely Chief with his long-drawn-out tragedy of a life and now the failure of the *Mirror* for his companions.

"Didn't I tell you?" A. B. turned his somberly triumphant eye on Jimmie.

But Jimmie refused to meet his look. His gaze had glued itself to the heart of the fire.

"How did he make that crazy mistake?" persisted A. B. the Pup.

Jimmie lifted his head, redder than usual in the glow of the coals. "I don't know," he shrugged. "Once heard of a case that might explain it. A chap was being tried for murder in the first degree. When the foreman of the jury rendered the verdict, 'Guilty,' he jumped into the air and clapped his

hands and shouted. People thought he'd gone nutty. Turned out he thought the man had said, 'Not guilty.' He heard the words he'd been saying over and over to himself. It took hanging to change his mind. I suppose the Chief's thought victory, dreamed victory, written victory so long that he heard what he wanted to."

"In the meantime," Marais's voice sounded to herself very small and far away, "what's going to become of the *Mirror*?"

"Can't you wheedle old daddy Wentworth into separating himself from some of his kale?" suggested A. B. the Pup maliciously.

A tongue of evil remembrance began wagging in her mind. I had forgotten him—and Preston. Now will be the time for them to try some scheme—some smooth, crooked plan worked out by Preston.

"Quit kidding," growled Jimmie, observing her drawn face. "Come on. Let's show Marais a time."

The three rode down to Oakland on a Telegraph Avenue car to "The Green Parrot" cabaret where Marais danced alternately with the two boys, and they consumed large quantities of ginger ale which refused to appease the thirst scorching her throat. At one-thirty they zigzagged arm in arm up the Virginia Street hill, singing in defiance of neighbors, vested interests, defeat, and of all the winking world of lights, "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-night."

At the door, Marais, having silenced Jimmie and A. B. into some discretion, gave them each a hand in farewell. How she hated to let go of them; dreaded to enter her lonely apartment—to face the fact that

if the *Mirror* didn't actually go to the wall there would have to be big cuts made in its running expenses. Her work would suffer, be crippled, perhaps lumped with A. B.'s. Just when she had built it to such a successful point. Just when she was counting on it to lessen the dull ache in her breast, to absorb her energy, and her mind. If the *Mirror* failed—if her work on it was snatched away from her—it was like cutting the one solid rock from beneath her feet. She stepped uncertainly into the dark living-room.

CHAPTER II

THE LONELY GIRL

THE next day was strange—stranger than the election night which had preceded it. A day like a nut whose polished shell conforms to nature's perfect markings, but inside the kernel is shriveled to dust. Marais said good morning as usual to the boys in the office, sat at her desk, followed up her leads, got flushed over an engagement scoop, shoved her copy in smartly on time. Between Jimmie and A. B. at noon she watched Bill-the-Dog-Man turning her eggs with his inimitable flip while he cocked one corner of his prize-fight-battered eye for her nod of approval. And all the while inside her that mocking voice that would not be hushed: "What's the use of it all? Why try to beat the *Journal* on the Mc-Millan engagement? You're battering your head against a stone wall. Any minute the Chief may open his door and come out to tell you that he's figured and figured and he doesn't see how the *Mirror* can carry on. Your stuff will be cut. Then the features. The paper will shrink and shrink. And you'll have to sit by and watch it die. Just like a mother hanging over a sick child. What's the use?"

Against these nagging thoughts she braced herself fiercely, almost shouting down the mocking words. And recalled herself only when Jimmie

stared at her, and exclaimed, "Hell, what a face, Marais. Sick or just mad at God?"

Then right after lunch while the Chief, who had left about noon, wrapt in an impenetrable fog of brooding, was still out, John Wentworth appeared. "Too bad the election went against us, Marais." Us, indeed. "Is Peter in?"

"No, but he'll be back any moment." She regarded him with hostile eyes. What was it the boys called him? Old buzzard. That was it. A buzzard. A bird of prey, swooping around a dying body. She wouldn't have been surprised to see Preston Marbury walking in to join him.

John Wentworth smirked at her, moistening his blue lips. "I don't care. I want to talk to you anyway. But when do you ever give me the chance these days?" He came a step closer and scrutinized her face carefully. "Not as blooming as usual, Marais. Cut up about the way things look for the paper? Never mind. They always seem worse than they really are." She wished he'd quit patting her arm in a pretense at comfort which was really one of his hateful caresses. "There may be a way. That depends——"

The Chief's entrance interrupted him and the two men disappeared. Through the hour they talked in Harnett's office Marais was so uneasy she couldn't keep at any one piece of work. Cut clippings, whistled, laid out her work for the next day, wrote a verse on A. B.'s comb-back. All the while never taking her mind's eye from the Chief's door.

At last the old man came out, his arm on Harnett's shoulder. "All right. I'll bring him over to-morrow."

Just as she had feared all along. The Chief and the *Mirror*—lambs among wolves. She knew what she must do. Scarcely waiting for the banker to wave his hand at her and leave, she marched straight into Harnett's office and stood there quivering like a raindrop on a leaf, opposite his kind, Pan's face which since John Wentworth's visit seemed to have recovered a glint of its old sparkle.

"Well, Marais?"

"I'm—I'm not asking any questions," she stammered. It was much harder to begin than she had realized in her first excitement.

"Yes?" The Chief's one desire was to help her along. She knew that.

"But if Mr. Wentworth has a plan about the paper—and Preston Marbury's got anything to do with it—cut it out." Her words fell like blocks of wood on a stone floor. She shut her eyes against her boldness in butting in on the Chief's private affairs. But it had to be done.

"How did you know he has a plan that Marbury has worked out?" At the amazement in his tone her eyelids flew open.

"When people care for anything—they know." Her voice faltered. "You—won't let him?"

The glow on the Chief's face was clouded by bewilderment. "But Marais, Preston Marbury seems like a fine chap. Wentworth says——"

"He's dishonest. I know—I know," she repeated vehemently. "He cheated a half crazy, old fellow out of his home in Oakleyville. Made him go completely off his head. I used to know him very well. I had——" The words stuck in her throat.

He must have noted the pallor of her slightly hol-

lowed cheeks, the tragic band of darkness her eyes beneath their black brows made across her face. "Why, Marais, if you say that Marbury is no good——"

Then her words came in a rush. "He'll get the paper mixed up in a dishonest subscription contest or something. I can't stand it for the *Mirror* to lower its flag. It mustn't." In her rage at the mere possibility she stamped her foot. "It had far better close its doors——" The last word ended on a harsh sob, torn from her rebellious breast.

Harnett's face flamed to her emotion. "I feel just as you do, child. It had better go on the rocks."

Suddenly she flung both arms about his neck and pressed her lips to his sad, brown cheek. She bolted out of his sanctum, out of the office toward the campus, head down. Was halted on the edge of the eucalyptus grove through which she always passed with a shiver of joy in its vast, green, restless quietude of moving leaves, halted by a swift awareness of something barring her path. Looked up, stared out of her dream, winked her eyes hard to find John Wentworth standing in front of her, a tight smile on his face at the cleverness of his trick, his bleared eyes gloating upon her.

"I thought you'd be coming along pretty soon, so I strolled about till I saw you."

He'd actually lain in wait for her among the eucalyptus trees. Marais's blood rose to her head. She said nothing.

Even his senile egotism was pricked finally by the steady scorn of her gaze. "Marais, I wanted to talk to you about the paper." He spoke quickly as if stung into justifying himself. "I've got a plan

to put it on its feet—Marbury and I. He's worked it out to the last point. A wonder, that boy."

Still she was silent.

He looked at her from beneath his parchment lids. "Do you know, Marais, why I've gone into this thing with Marbury? For you. You love the *Mirror*. If Peter pushes his highfalutin' notions any farther it will fail. Somebody's got to take hold of it. Somebody with pep. And Marbury can do it if I put up the cash. I'm going to, Marais, if you'll only say the word."

She might have been one of the eucalyptus trees among which she stood, slim and tall and finely hard, her feet planted firmly on the ground. "What word?" she asked bluntly, unable to believe her own ears.

"Marais, Marais, couldn't you love me just a little? I'm not such an old fellow, after all." With the jaunty straightening of his thin shoulders she felt, even in the midst of her wrathful disgust, a twinge of pity. "We could have such good times together. I'll give you anything in the world you want."

Her mind still slumped dully. She gazed at the white stems of the trees forming a dim, cathedral nave about them, at the chinks of clouded sky through the quivering, silver-gray leaves, at the old, old man before her whose immaculate collar couldn't hide the stringy flesh of his Adam's apple.

"Do you mean you want to marry me?" she queried deliberately, looking straight at him as though to force his old mind to define the evil of his intention toward her.

Instantly his eyes blinked cunningly. She noted

how a thin flush crept up his gray skin. "Let's go to the city for a little supper—just the two of us—to-night, to talk it over. You can have anything you ask of me, Marais."

At his attempt to take her in his arms, Marais jerked herself away with a hot prickle of disgust, edged by ironic amusement. So he didn't want to marry her—hedged at the very word. But he'd invite her to the private room of some questionable restaurant, bribe her with promises of gifts. She felt the palms of her tight-shut hands burn. With a grimace she tried to still her thumping pulses. Too cheap a thing to make one angry. In fact it had its ridiculous side. Mr. Wentworth, her grandfather's friend, their neighbor of a lifetime, attempting to establish—what was the newspaper term for it?—"illicit relations" with her. Why, it sounded like the Ouida novels her mother used to forbid her to read. She swallowed the little quakes of excited laughter which would have shaken her from head to foot, and eyed him severely. This bad, old man was really a subject for discipline. Queer how she was shaken by pity for his forlorn, obscene old eyes sunk in their yellow sockets, for the thousand tiny wrinkles about his mouth running to cover beneath the well-kept brush heap of his gray, faggoty mustache, heard beyond his ugly, bargaining invitation the cry of one clutching at lost youth and romance, at whatever price, to escape the flat senility of sapless age.

"Why do you set a different standard for me from the one you set for Sydney, Mr. Wentworth?" she asked him gently.

If she had hoped to divert his wicked, frail

thoughts from herself, she couldn't have succeeded more adroitly.

"Sydney! Standards! When in God's name did anybody ever connect standards with Sydney?" He fairly shouted the words. The volcano seethed under such a thin covering that it needed only a touch to send it spurting through the thin veneer of surface manners. "Don't mention her name in my presence."

Marais stayed silent.

He continued to stare at her fiercely, his recent talk with her quite forgotten. "You've always stood up for her. But if you'd had to pay for her extravagances as I have, you wouldn't think it was so funny. If she was the kind of a girl you are, things would be different. But she's killing her mother."

"Is Mrs. Dalrymple worse?"

"She's dying by inches. And it's Sydney being up all night at drunken parties and running around instead of living properly with her husband that's helping her mother to her grave." His rage had sunk into querulous scolding.

Marais studied his shriveled face from which the rheumy eyes looked at her bleakly. The incongruity of the situation twitched the corners of her mouth. John Wentworth who had not five minutes before hinted at improper proposals to her, delivering a lecture on Sydney's misdemeanors. What a blessing he didn't know the facts about her and Quent. He'd forgive her anything but those. Forgive! After all, what had he to do with forgiveness?

"But, Mr. Wentworth, you know you're proud of Sydney. Why, you'd give her the moon if you could." She couldn't understand why she wanted

to bring what comfort she could to his barren, moneyed life.

"Do you know why I've indulged her? Because I've been all alone for so long, and she's the only thing I've got to love."

Marais could have sworn that tears had replaced the moisture always swimming in his eyes. "But there's Mrs. Dalrymple," she suggested.

"She's never had a mind of her own," he snorted impatiently. "And my wife——"

The girl nodded dumbly. She filled in his eloquent pause with all she needed to know of Mrs. Wentworth's twenty-five violent years in the Napa Asylum for the Insane, cut off by a more violent death.

"I had plenty of lovely lady friends, Marais," he went on. "But there was always—that thing in the background. My home was like a tomb. When Sydney came along I said to myself, 'Here's the joy of my life.' But from the time she was a baby you couldn't satisfy her with anything. She was restless—had to gallivant off to Europe—live in New York." He broke off suddenly. "You say I've given her everything, and I guess that's so. But I've been hard on her too. She makes me so angry sometimes that I could kill her. It's when I get a certain feeling about her—I've never told anybody before. I've been afraid to. But somehow, it's a comfort to talk to you, Marais. She's the living image of my wife. Same golden hair. That sparkle in her eye. The way she whirls about on her heels and looks at you over her shoulder. Sometimes—like the other night when I came in unexpectedly on the party, and saw her standing there in the middle of the floor, her head thrown back, looking at me as

if she'd defy me to the last ditch—I'm afraid—Sydney, my wife, looked just that way the last time—" The thin color drained from his face leaving it a pitiful mask streaked with chilblained red.

Marais laid her hand impulsively on his sleeve. "Don't worry. Sydney's all right. She——"

"Marais." Once more she felt his cold, dry grasp upon her arm. "Marais, help me to forget. I'll do anything for you. I'll save the *Mirror*. Let's have a little supper together. I love——"

She left him babbling there in the eucalyptus grove and went striding across the shadowy campus, the blood singing in her ears. You can't do anything for a person like that. He doesn't think straight for five minutes. Bad clean through. Or feeble-minded. She'd be glad to get home and shut him out.

But when she stood in the dusk of her living-room, she was all at once chilled by the feeling of her aloneness. Would have even thought of John Wentworth if she could. By a sinister twist, however, she had lost the only link with him that could give her solace—his long-ago neighborliness, the times when he used to call her and Sydney his girls, giving them two bits apiece for candy, when he talked with her mother over the glittering, iron fence, telling her what a fine young lady Marais was growing to be, when he counseled with her about her Uncle Webb, and offered to pay the thousand dollars he had taken— No, she hadn't the power to call up those times. So much that was ugly had slipped between. The poor, bad old man.

Oh, she was solitary enough. Her hands empty, of her work when the *Mirror* was gone. Other work couldn't possibly be the same. The differences be-

tween herself and her mother impossible to bridge. There was Sydney, too, strangely unlike herself and keeping Marais at arm's length. And Dan, Dan—their walks together in the enfolding, warm fog—the stormy tenderness of his black eyes—his strength protecting her like a great rock— Already those pictures had receded until they were like scenes at the end of a telescope.

Suddenly the intangible blur of twilight already welding objects into an indeterminate whole became unbearable. She switched on the light, blinking at its yellow flood. At the same moment her apartment bell rang, not incisively, but with gentle tentativeness.

When she opened the door Gil Sommer-in-dyke stood on the threshold smiling at her over a huge bunch of violets.

CHAPTER III

THINKING IT THROUGH

SHE greeted him with an unexpected rush of pleasure, burying her nose in the old-fashioned, purple fragrance of his offering. In the excitement of Sydney's evening, her parting with Dan afterwards, and the turn of affairs at the *Mirror* office he had drifted into a dim world of delightful whimsies wherein she had no place. But he had come back as unobtrusively as he had gone. Observing him amusedly as he made himself comfortable on the couch, with pillows behind his head, she noted how perfectly everything about him from his relaxed body to his quiet, detached mind merged into her surroundings.

"I'm here to find rest for my soul." He tilted his head against a blue cushion in order to watch Marais arrange her flowers at the kitchenette sink. "This is the only peaceful spot on earth. Or will be if you'll turn off the upper lights, Marais, my heart."

At her compliance he sighed in profound relief. "Contrast after Sydney's. We've had turmoil in our house for a week."

Marais raised her eyebrows. It was wonderfully restful just to sit opposite Gil, her hands folded, the woodsy, dark perfume of the violets in her nostrils, knowing that he didn't mind her silence.

"Sydney's been acting up. First a tornado; then

a sphinx. She got Berta really enthusiastic over a trip to the Orient, passage engaged and everything. Then presto, milady decides there'll be no voyage. Hasn't vouchsafed a scrap of explanation. Just shuts herself in her room and glooms."

Marias's brow wrinkled. "That isn't any more like Sydney than——"

"Than for a bird of paradise to suddenly shed its colors. I know it."

"Of course she's terribly worried about Mrs. Dalrymple," murmured Marais, recalling with a shiver of repugnance Mr. Wentworth's comment on that situation.

Gil looked thoughtful. "Perhaps not as much as she ought to be. No, it has nothing directly to do with her mother and her grandfather. It's different. Deeper, I should say, than anything that's ever struck her."

Marais's eyes grew more troubled.

Gil regarded her steadily, as though studying her face in a new light. "Well, it's had one effect," he remarked absently. "Berta has taken her revenge by deciding to go East this week, in spite of the fact that Sydney came out of her trance long enough to beg her to stay. She hates to be alone in the house with her mother."

"Are you going, too?" The question was startled out of her before she had time to check it.

The gentle irony of his eyes was quenched by a sudden light. For a moment she thought that light was going to solidify into words. Feared it. Hoped he wouldn't reply. He only said, shrugging his shoulders slightly, "That depends," all the while regarding her shadowed face.

"How's the novel coming on?" he asked casually after a space.

"Not at all," she laughed shortly. How long ago was it they had argued over Christine and Riega?

He sat up, hunching his knees beneath his chin. "Terrible, the effect you have on a fellow, Marais. Samson shorn of all his locks would have the strength of ten in your presence. Your vitality, I suppose. Pioneer stock and all that sort of thing."

"What are you talking about, Gil?"

"A sudden spurt to get to work on that book of yours. Damned good stuff. Too good to forget. I've been thinking about the climax in the second part. Get out your notes, will you?"

As she took her seat opposite him at her work-table, papers filled with her handwriting spread out between them, Marais's blood quickened. For two hours they talked, discussing, arguing, differing, concurring. Marais wrote and rewrote, making copious marginal notes. As an accompaniment to his comments, Gil drew a diagram of the whole plot which, Marais told him, was the exact reproduction of the pictured guillotine in her "Child's History of France."

At a moment's pause in her writing, her mind still thronging with a hundred ideas and plans for her story, she watched Gil sketching with careful strokes a fated figure on the top of his scaffold. The light shone on his artist's hands, on his high scholar's brow, his blue-veined lids hiding the dreams touched by irony at his foolish idealism of which he had said to Marais: "Like Bermuda grass. I stamp it out, believe it's gone, and the next thing it's flourishing under my very nose." The

lower part of his thoughtful, brown face was hidden; but she knew he was smiling quietly. What would this evening have been without him? He had spurred her mind to such heightened activity that her characters lived for the first time. The knotty problem of the climax was settled. She was already promising herself she'd find time to write a little each day. All Gil's fault.

He lifted his eyes. They were shining with dreams, the irony completely obliterated. "You asked me a while ago whether I'm leaving when Berta does. Only one person can answer that question. That's you."

He rose quietly and switched off all the lights. In the darkness Marais heard him move to the couch. Gradually her eyes became accustomed to the dim luminosity which filled the room. Through her half-opened window she beheld a sprinkle of stars on a blue velvet curtain. From far below floated the murmuration of the wind, the bay, the settling of evening life. Across the city the lights gleamed and quivered as through a tender mist. A bird fluttered in the shrubbery near the window. Peace brooded over the world. The night caught its breath, listening.

When Gil spoke at last he was a voice in the darkness. "I'm going to run up to Oroville for a few days' powwow with Joe Brewster." She knew about the crippled poet with whom he had long kept up a correspondence. "When I come back I'm off to Santa Barbara—if you'll come along. I want you, Marais."

Another long, long silence. So this had awaited her in the dusk. Gil wanted her to go away with

him. Not to be married; he would never consider marriage. Not with his fear of shackles, his jealous guardianship of his liberty. Beneath his careless whimsicality one detected the wildness of a creature of the woods, startled into flight by the mere whiff of captivity. No, he'd never bind himself.

Again his voice. "Until now I haven't believed you could ever be happy with what I'm offering you. The old restraints were yapping too hard at your heels. But now—to-night you are different. Somehow released. Willing to go on. You see I know you, Marais."

She heard a movement, saw him upright by the couch. He came and stood before her. "You've put me in the mood for work, Delilah," he laughed. "And I want to see you go after your novel. Santa Barbara will be just the place. Hard work in the morning. Sunshine and roses and the sea in the afternoon. You and I and the sunset in the evening. And afterwards, when the moon dips low, all the lovely stars full of people just like ourselves. Oh, Marais."

What was the strange aching at her heart? This world shot with beauty, with the magic of the unknown adventure unrolling before her eyes? There was nothing to keep her from trying her power to fly, from burnishing her wings in the sun of love and genius. Nothing but——

"You see," Gil was whispering as he knelt beside her and took her cold hands in his, "I love you, Marais. You've won me in spite of myself—your eyes with the dreams in them—your mouth that's sweet even when it's stern—your complete reality. You're narrow and opinionated and young. God,

you're young! But I suppose He made you that way to keep me from madness over your loveliness and your honesty."

Marais straightened herself. "But Gil——"

He kissed both her hands. "Listen, dearest. This isn't a thing to be decided in a moment. Think it over while I'm away. The decision is important. You don't go into things lightly. Nor do I, odd as that may seem. I've a feeling that if we hit it off together, it will be for life. We'll travel, study, work, meet people you want to know. But you must be sure. The balance between your body and mind is too fine to be strained by a constant struggle in yourself. Think it through while I'm gone. Straight through. If you can be serene in acceptance, you'll have come into your own."

Marais stood up. They faced one another in the violet scented dimness. "I know already." Her voice was quite steady. "Do you think I'd go away and leave the Chief in the lurch? When the *Mirror* is tottering on the verge of ruin?"

Gil's laugh was so hearty that it startled her. "Spoken like her own mother's daughter." He swung her hands gayly back and forth. "Casabianca, all the more beloved for your loyalty. Think it through. When you make up your mind, send me a wire at Oroville." The confidence in his voice puzzled her.

That night she dreamed feverishly. She was in the swirling fog, on a hillside, running as fast as her feet could take her along a narrow trail—straining her ears to learn if she was escaping the sound of Dan's swiftly pursuing steps. They beat nearer and nearer—she urged herself to greater swiftness

—there was a touch on her arm—she whirled—to see herself face to face with her mother. “Dan will make you a good husband; he’ll be such an excellent provider.” Mrs. Plover’s voice was stern and layers of fog barred her white face horizontally. “You love him—” “But I don’t,” Marais protested, battling the old, unreasoning tremor of her heart at the grim judge’s eye. “I haven’t a speck of feeling when you speak his name.” “That’s one of your modern notions,” “No, no. He killed my love. It can never come back. Besides, I’m going away with—” But struggle as she would, she couldn’t finish her sentence, for the fog wrapped itself around her and choked the words in her throat. She knew one thing only, in the midst of its clammy, smothering embrace. All her love for Dan was gone. Not even a wing of feeling brushed her heart. No more leapings and pulsings of flesh and spirit toward him. “The numbness is better than that fearful heartache anyway,” she murmured in her sleep. “This isn’t a dream. In the morning I’ll wake up to find it true.” But in the morning her head felt so odd and stuffy that she forgot the words and the vision.

At the office the Chief asked her to come into his sanctum. The clear brightness of his slanting eyes made her look at him twice.

“We talked yesterday,” he began abruptly. “So I must tell you to-day.”

“What is it, sir?”

“We can carry on. Without Wentworth—or Marbury’s plan. For a while—until the paper is more firmly on its feet. The matter was arranged last night.”

Marais stared at him. In the back of her mind a tiny light began breaking, like the first shot of sun across a shadowy plain. "What is this relief I'm feeling?" she asked herself curiously. "It hasn't anything to do with the *Mirror*. It's concerned with me. There's a load off my shoulders and a clear road ahead. What is it?" A deep blush spread to her forehead as she caught the wistful radiance of Peter Harnett's eye. If he knew how her thoughts were straying?

"I'm so glad. How—how did it happen?" she stammered.

It was the Chief's turn to look shy, uncomfortable, and somehow guilty. "I'm sorry, but I am bound to secrecy. The person who put up the money didn't want his name given." Marais believed it was difficult for him to look at her as he got the words out.

"Pardon me," she murmured. "I didn't mean to intrude."

She scarcely heard Peter Harnett's quick disclaimer. In her mind the faint light was growing, growing—"Didn't want his name given"—but was scarcely bright enough yet to clear up the reason for the Chief's uneasiness, which she knew and didn't know, like a face in the mist one strains to see even while its lineaments disappear. That odd light whose lengthening finger couldn't keep up with her leaping, inexplicable sense of relief not directly concerned with the *Mirror's* reprieve. But would soon catch it, pin it down, find out its cause. Too important to lose.

There was no time during the day to follow that random, shooting brightness into the unexplored grayness of her mind. And when evening came and

she was once more at home, she told herself she was too tired to be illumined—was content to lie on the couch where Gil had thrown himself the night before, and watch the sunset fade over the shining waters of the Golden Gate. With the dying of the many colored lights the shadows in Marais's mind fled, leaving it as clear as a sunny table-land.

She was going with Gil. She sat up, her relief at Peter Harnett's news about the paper explained.

There had been no conscious examination of her thought, no conscious argument. She simply knew she was going. And with that knowledge came peace. She could sit there, her hands folded, the quiet within her as complete as the utter stillness of the dusky room. She was going with Gil. Her love for Dan was dead. Nobody's heart could feel as numb and have any emotion left in it. She wanted to go. It was complete escape. The only way.

She stood up. She'd send Gil a wire. He had already gone to Oroville. He'd understand the one word "going," and her initials. And he'd be glad.

But before she attended to that, there was something else she must do—write to her mother. She couldn't listen to that subtle little voice which said, "Why hurt her and let yourself in for a lot of trouble? Just go away quietly. It's nobody's business but yours and Gil's." No, there should be no sneaking off as though she were ashamed or sorry or afraid. It would seem like Sydney's deception of her grandfather which she had always scorned in her heart. No, she would tell her mother frankly she was going. "Gil and I have decided to go away together"—and why. "For the first time I am beginning to see that my life is really mine to do with

as I please." That surely would break her bondage, the shadowy chain binding flesh and flesh, the habit of years, maybe of centuries. She'd write it immediately. Then it would be ready. She threw out her hand in a thrusting gesture of freedom.

For two hours she labored over the sentences, the corners of her scarlet mouth as grim as the set of her mother's lips, in her eyes a spark of repressed excitement. At length three sheets were filled, folded, thrust into an envelope, signed, sealed, and addressed. Then she placed the completed document in a desk drawer against the proper time for mailing it.

After that she called up Western Union and sent the telegram.

CHAPTER IV

IN A HIGH MOUNTAIN

"COME at once. Charter a plane. Anything to make it P. D. Q." The phrases in the special-delivery letter Marais had from Sydney a week later kept spinning through her head as, in answer to its imperative summons, she went to San Francisco early in the afternoon. "Something miraculous to tell you. Quent'll be here any time now. Mother so much better I had decided to go on with Berta. But he wired he was coming West. That isn't the news, though. I've something wonderful for your ears alone. So fly the moment you get this."

How like Sydney's impatience to hold her for days at arm's length and then suddenly demand her presence with the gesture of a princess. And encouraged in her imperiousness because at her call Marais came—always would, she rightly guessed.

Marais smiled at the green slopes of Goat Island by which the ferryboat was at that moment gliding. Would any one ever thwart Sydney? Here was Quent Waynor, unable to stand her absence any longer, on his way to California. In spite of the purple rages into which she threw her grandfather she had her foot on his neck. Preston Marbury had evidently fallen victim to her charms. Gil had spoken of his frequent calls at the Dalrymple house. Marais's eyes darkened. A good thing Quent was

coming. Or would it only complicate matters? What in the world was the news Sydney had for her?

As the boat jostled its way into the Ferry Building slip, and a flock of sea gulls flashed upward, as if released by signal, she rose to follow the crowd. She wondered what Sydney would say to the fact that at that moment in her pocket lay a telegram from Gil which ran: "Hail, Goddess of Liberty. Was ever a man so blest?" She'd approve, of course. Or would she? Sydney had a proud, jealous streak. At any rate, Marais couldn't tell her. Every fiber of her being shrank from discussing the step she and Gil were to take in two days' time. Later—after they were in Santa Barbara—perhaps. But now her frankness must end with her mother.

All the way out to Sydney's she sat calmly in the street car, her hands folded. It had been that way ever since her decision. Folded hands. Letting life surge about her, without disturbing her achieved serenity—a serenity so complete it was almost numbness.

"Mrs. Waynor says will you come right up to her room?" the starched maid told her in answer to her thump of the Dalrymple knocker.

When she opened the door to Sydney's bedroom her friend was lying on the day bed in a white, Turkish tea gown embroidered heavily with gold, her hair falling about her pale face like roped masses of precious metal. At the sight of Marais her eyes glistened, she opened her arms wide.

"Oh, how I've missed you, darling," she whispered, and Marais felt hot tears on her hands.

“What was it kept you from sending for me?” she murmured, her lips on Sydney’s forehead.

“The devil, I guess; but he’s exorcised.” Sydney settled herself with a sigh of relief in Marais’s arms. “Darling, did you know I had made up my mind to go to New York Friday with Berta?” She nodded toward the half-packed trunks filling a generous portion of the room.

“Is your mother well enough for that?”

A shadow crossed Sydney’s face. “Oh, she’s ever so much better. Dr. Haynes says she’d be quite all right if she’d only quit jumping out of bed at every noise and catching her death of cold running up and down the hall. She doesn’t act with the discretion of a child. I don’t know what’s come over her.”

Marais, seeing her vexation, resolved on no more interruptions. Sydney had something to tell her. She must have her way.

“It’s a complete confession, Marais, old dear. I decided at first to go without a word to a soul—not even to you.”

“But why, dear?” This time her cue was evidently such a query.

“When big things happen to one, mere people don’t count.”

“But it’s different between you and me, Marais. There’s something. It kept tugging and tugging. I couldn’t keep it quiet. After Quent wired, I suppose I’ve never been so happy in my life. I knew then I had to tell you my secret.” Her face, thinner than Marais had ever seen it, had softened until all the restless petulance was lost in its sweetness. The brown eyes, hollowed slightly, were suffused with a

tremulous, inner light. She drew Marais's head down until her lips touched her friend's ear.

"Marais," very softly.

"Yes, Sydney." Marais scarcely breathed for fear of disturbing the poised moment.

"I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh, Sydney!" With a jerk at her heart that all but forced from her lips a cry, Marais drew Sydney close, folding both arms tightly across the slender shoulders.

"How long have you known?" she finally asked.

"Since the night of the party. At first it seemed to me I'd go crazy. But the more I thought about it, the happier I got. And finally, after I'd shut myself up and gone over the situation from every angle, I made up my mind. Only one thing to do—in spite of principles—in spite of everything." She gave a little, shamefaced laugh. "Get married. Oh, I know it's laying down the flag I've waved so long. But I'd do much more than that for my baby. Who'd ever dream it would be this way? I thought mother instinct was only a legend. Marais, isn't it wonderful? I hope it's a boy with a head just like Quent's."

Sydney's eyes were like misty stars.

"When I telegraphed Quent I was going to New York, he wired he had already planned to come West. He doesn't know, of course. He'll be here any time now. You two will meet. I've wanted you to know one another for so long. You'll love Quent, Marais. He's a dear. And won't he be excited about—little Quent?"

Long after she had left Sydney with tender promises to see her on the morrow—if not then, when

would she have the chance, since she would be in Santa Barbara? Though Sydney didn't know that—the shadowed sweetness of her friend's eyes, the poignancy of her softened voice, haunted Marais. This new image of Sydney, lovely in its subdued expectancy, accompanied her into the apartment, sat opposite her at her solitary meal, and went with her after dinner as, with Mrs. Plover's weekly letter in her pocket, the girl made her way up the stone steps across Virginia Street. They led to the hillside path winding past vagrant, isolated houses whose windows were transmuted to winking, mischievous gold in the sun's final, level rays. Such a stillness lay over everything that the very houses seemed untenanted. The soft evening, the end of one of those November days in Berkeley when the wind is still and the sky is stainless and the air holds in its breath, the restrained fierceness of winter mingled with a promise of spring's hurting freshness, had called her forth. She turned from time to time in her ascent to drink in the profound quietude. The only sign of life besides herself and the thin columns of smoke rising from the chimneyed houses on the slanting checkerboard below her was the figure of one man moving pygmylike up from the bottom of the Virginia Street hill.

When she reached the brow of the naked cliff she threw her sweater on the ground and sat down cross-legged. From her blouse she unpinned a bunch of the old-fashioned violets Gil sent her every day now, and held them between her and the sky. But their rich darkness made the heavens almost gray in comparison. She buried her face in their cool fragrance, pinned them again on her dress, and fell to waiting

for the first star which should tremble forth as a guardian for some home far below.

It was a great relief to come up here away from voices and the scraping of street-car wheels and the honks of automobiles—the crunching noises of the world. To sit idly, knowing she didn't have to read her mother's letter until she chose, could sniff her violets and watch the rose-blue above the horizon fade into twilight, luxuriating in the knowledge that hereafter she would be able to do as she pleased, think her own thoughts at random, dream when she desired, outside the three hours of stern work she and Gil had set aside in their schedule. She realized sharply enough that the last milestone of the old road had been passed. Only this morning she had shut the door on her Berkeley experience by saying good-by to the Chief. After his first astonishment and his question, "Tired of us, Marais?" he had seemed to struggle with his need to tell her something of which he was forbidden to speak. But she was glad he had only said, "When you are rested, come back. The *Mirror* is partly yours—more now than ever. Remember that," with that sad, beseeching look she couldn't forget. She had enough to think about without adding the exciting knowledge the Chief reluctantly restrained himself from sharing with her.

For she couldn't dismiss the vivid impression of Sydney she had brought with her across the bay, couldn't forget her shamefaced laugh and low words, "Only one thing to do—in spite of principles—in spite of everything. Get married." After all her scorn of convention and her revolt against forms and ceremonies, she had been ready enough to yield

to society's laws when the test came. Marais moved restlessly. Could it be that her own decision to go with Gil was based wrongly? That at the first sign of adverse wind she would want their craft safely havened? She lifted her head firmly. The two cases weren't comparable. Sydney's affair with Quent Waynor had been founded on dishonesty—concealment from her grandfather who was practically supporting them. Her independence had been defiance. Her freedom had been built on deceit. "But Gil and I have at least been honest," thought Marais. "I'm going to mail my letter to mother before I leave Berkeley. Our arrangement is a partnership, not a reckless gesture at fate." In their unemotional, frank talks about money, Gil, foreseeing that Marais would accept nothing from him, had suggested that she be paid a certain sum for managing their household as well as a salary for acting as his secretary. Soon, he assured her, she'd be able to do creditable feature stuff for the newspapers. Later when they went to New York—he had a dozen plans for her steadily increasing income which he unfolded with his whimsical smile, stooping to kiss her fingers between words, while she sat in blessed passivity, glad she could still contribute her share to the upkeep of the home in Oakleyville—if her mother would accept it. Oh, their plans had all been worked out quite perfectly, and the day after to-morrow they would be on their way to Santa Barbara. In the meantime she had asked Gil not to see her.

The grass about the spot on which Marais sat was becoming softly gilded. The girl, roused from her reverie, looked over her shoulder. A half-grown moon had swung above the hill crest. It was still

the twilight of a moonlit evening, that unreal moment when the gray and the gold meet, tremble and melt, the brightness overrunning the shadow of fading daylight. Too dim now to read her mother's letter. It would have to wait till later. Besides, she liked to sit, doing nothing, in this ethereal quietude.

A step crunched on the turf. Marais looked up, startled. A man's form blotted out the moon's disk as he came around the edge of the cliff. His face was in the shadow, but those great shoulders, that swinging stride, belonged to only one person in the world.

He stood before her breathing a little heavily. "I saw you when you started up the hill. To make sure I went to the apartment. But I knew I should find you here." His voice came low and uneven.

Marais did not unclasp her hands. She looked up at him, trying to read in his face the riddle of his coming. But she said nothing, although her heart remained quiet in her bosom, so quiet that it poised motionless like a bird asleep in the foliage.

Dan took off his hat and moved a step nearer. The moonlight full on his face showed him so changed that at first she thought it was the hollowing effect of the pale gloom. But as her eyes became more accustomed to the faint light, she made out the deep lines beneath his somber eyes, the stern suffering of his mouth, a hushed shadow over his rugged features which she had never seen there before.

His eyes plunged deep into hers. "Is it true that you're going away, Marais?" His voice was still husky.

Then the feathered creature on the branch thrilled

awake. "Yes, but how did you know?" Her head went up in its old defensive pride.

"Harnett told me." He stayed her indignant exclamation by a gesture—not of command. Was it of humility? "Don't be annoyed with him. It came out quite unintentionally—in connection with something else." He hesitated a moment.

Marais said nothing. She compressed her lips, her anger beginning to rise. Why should he intrude upon her privacy when he knew she didn't want to see him?

He was speaking again. "I came really to ask you one question." His gaze never wavered from hers although his voice, like that of a stranger, remained low and broken. And he weighed each word he uttered as if afraid its value might be misplaced. "Why—are—you—going—away?"

She drew back sharply. All at once her eyes stung, she was seized with a desire to weep. "I can't tell you that," she declared passionately.

"Marais," his deep voice thrilled her to quiet, "Marais, don't try to tell me, then; but if it has anything to do with—us, you don't have to go——"

The pitiful boyishness of him thinking she was leaving Berkeley on account of him—of them. That was enough to make her laugh. It was so ridiculous, so grotesque. What was he saying?

"—You don't have to go—because I'm going."

A sweet wind blew in from the bay, lifting the little ends of hair that curled about her forehead. Still he stood there motionless, but his words had already removed him a great way off.

Then Marais knew why her eyes burned and her throat thickened with sobs and she felt so alien from

Dan up here on the hilltop. It was because already in spirit he was removed from her. Something had happened to him since that night of Sydney's party—some change she couldn't name which touched everything he said, the expression of his face, the very set of his rough-blocked head upon his shoulders. Whatever it was it filled her with intense sadness at the futility of all human things.

"But I'm not going away on account of—us," she said softly.

He turned his hat in his hands. "I thought—you were more interested in the *Mirror* than anything in the world," he ventured.

Marais knitted her brows. Confusing to be jerked back so swiftly. The *Mirror*.

He looked at her beseechingly. "I hoped, if the paper went, you'd be happy."

If the paper went on. The low light that had risen in her mind the day the Chief had told her the paper could carry on flamed full above the shadowy horizon of doubt. Dan had made it possible for the *Mirror* to carry on. He had done it for her sake. That was why he and Peter Harnett had talked of her going away.

She rose, something wild in her face and the motion she made with her hands. "You—you saved the *Mirror*," she stammered.

He drew back. "Saved nothing," he muttered. "I'm well secured for what I did."

"Why did you do it?" What if he knew that in saving the paper he had made it possible for her to go with Gil?

"To make you happy." This time his words were a growl. In all the tumult pounding through her

veins she knew that growl was his only defense against completely breaking down.

"Oh, it takes more than that to make me happy."

"I know."

Her hands went up to shield her working face. "Why—why are you so late in knowing?" The demand ended on a sob.

She felt a touch upon her dress and opened her eyes. He was on his knees before her in the moonlight which lay like a caress on both of them. She trembled at the light in his ravaged face.

"Marais—dearest—it's not too late. I love you—I wonder if God knows how much. Stay. Don't go. Love me. Marry me."

The bird poised once more silent on the bough. "No, no," she murmured, shaking her head. "I don't love you. Not now."

At the finality of her tone he stood up. She saw tears glistening on his lined cheeks. "Then if you don't love me, stay and be happy in your work. I won't trouble you. The government has asked me to manage a job in Russia. I'm going." His gesture had in it that strange, new humility which removed him from her knowledge.

It came to Marais suddenly what she must do. He loved her. Oh, she knew that now, if she never had before. She would deal openly with him as she was going to do with her mother.

"Dan," her face was drained of every vestige of blood, "I'm going away too—with Gil Sommer-indyke."

He listened dazedly, the furrow deepening between his brows. Then he raised his haggard eyes. "With Sommer-in-dyke," he repeated. "Not——"

Marais nodded, calm settling upon her like a mantle.

His face whitened slowly. She shrank from the fire in his eyes. His nostrils fanned with the breath between his teeth. The moisture glistening on his face this time was the sweat of agony.

"By God, you shall not!" he panted, towering over her, his hands opening and closing till the joints in his fingers cracked.

She fronted him, flashing the pride of her freedom in his face. "Oh, yes, I shall. And I'm going where 'Shall not' isn't used. That's why things were impossible between you and me, Dan."

He was silent so long that at last she looked at him. Into his face had come that remote look of which she had been aware earlier, the look of one whose secret tears had washed him clean of pride and stubbornness. It sweetened his mouth and carved his features into a stark nobility. He spoke.

"I love you. That is all I know. If you must go—you must. But you, your essential self—will always be you—and I shall love you to the end of the world."

For a time they faced one another, Dan drinking in the beauty of her brow, her hair, her lips, her eyes, as if he looked his last upon her, slaking his thirst at the fount that had always refreshed him, and would remain for him eternally a shrine of beauty. Then he turned and passed down the hillside, and so out of her sight.

CHAPTER V

IN THE CORRIDOR

“I MUST go over to see Sydney.” When Marais woke the next morning on those murmured words, the shadowed radiance of Sydney’s face floated before her dream-filled eyes, and she remembered the promise she had made to herself as she sank into troubled sleep the night before. She couldn’t leave Berkeley for her new life without holding Sydney—this, new, tender Sydney—once more in her arms and pledging again her love for the brilliant creature who had always charmed her, and now called forth all the devotion of her ardent nature.

She stretched her arms, and drew her watch from beneath her pillow. Then she sat up straight. It *was* going to be a crowded morning. The men were coming from the Students’ Storage Company to pack her furniture and books preparatory to storing them. She had her clothes to pack, the grocer, milkman, wash Chinaman and her landlady to pay. These things she always did in person, a habit acquired from her mother whose monthly trips down to Central Avenue to settle her accounts used to be a triumphal gesture at the poverty which dogged her undaunted footsteps. It was as if she said, confronting the world of Oakleyville with her firm and courageous face, “One more month has gone by and you see, I’m still ahead of the game. John Plover’s

widow can keep a roof over her children's heads and look everybody square in the face."

Usually her spirits rose zestfully to such a busy program as stretched before her mind's eye. But on this morning, bright as shattered diamonds in the sharp December sunshine, a heaviness, more fixed than her passing uneasiness for Sydney, lay on her chest and made her draw the covers again about her. She knew what clogged her heart and crippled her buoyancy. Her encounter with Dan on the hillside the evening before. Dreamlike in her mind, had the very memory of it the power to drown her in inertia? Well, she'd see about that.

With one bound she was in the middle of the floor, winding the long braids of hair about her head as she ran into the bathroom. Her eyes sparkled at her success in routing the foe. Oh, she'd gained a lot of poise and self-control during the past weeks. She whistled confidently as she turned on the cold water, slipped from her gown, and, blue bathing cap protecting her hair, stood beneath the tingling spray.

Over her coffee and toast she read, conscience-stricken, her mother's letter propped against the marmalade jar, glancing down the pages of oddly cramped, half-printed handwriting which gave an impression of the writer's definiteness of ideas and unswerving strength of conviction. Nothing unusual had happened. Young John would soon be out of grammar school, ready for the first year in high. Impossible that the child should have grown up so fast, thought Marais. It was only yesterday that he was in rompers, playing half scared with Bean-is-ter Fos-is-ter. What a tall, fine fellow he was growing

to be with his straight shoulders, his well-shaped, russet head and stormy eyes. Theodore had been out all night on one of his yearly toots, and she and Young John had had to pull him out of the lily bed the next morning. Hay Spinkham was calling for larger orders of cakes. Both bridge clubs had had recent meetings. At Mrs. Sharsbury's she had won the first prize, two lovely guest towels. Marais smiled. Mother must have enough linen to stock Oakleyville by this time. Cousin Jaquith was there in a new blue silk, looking pretty and fresh as she used to before she was married. No wonder with Abner getting richer every day of his life. He was adding to the house and had bought a new Cadillac car. Jaquith had done well for herself. Abner was a good man and a good provider. Poor mother, it's a shame Jaquith wasn't her daughter instead of me. She must close now, for she could hear Young John coming around the house from school and they were to do some work in the garden, getting ready for winter. The reason that Marais's father had such success with flowers was because he worked with them all the time.

Marais folded the letter with a sigh. Not much of a life for a person as proud and ambitious as her mother. In another sphere she might have been the maker of kings, a wise and strategic power behind a glittering throne.

The morning was eaten up by the packers. It was three o'clock before she found time to telephone Sydney she'd be over later for a little while if it was convenient. Four before she had emptied the contents of her dresser drawers and had paid her bills, and taken carefully from the desk drawer the letter

she had written to her mother. A superstitious feeling about being sure it went made her carry it herself to the main post office on Kittredge Street. She watched the oblong envelope slip through the green letter slide. Its disappearance was charged for her with significance. "That casts the die," she murmured, and walked toward Shattuck Avenue where the electroliers were pricking the dusk with bubbles of yellow light. It was quite dark by the time she caught the Key Route train from Berkeley station.

"All the same I'm glad I came," she thought as she settled herself tiredly in the jolting wicker seat. "Sydney's voice hasn't sounded so glad in a long time. We'll have such a cozy chat. But it's too bad Mrs. Dalrymple isn't so well. I wonder what all this will do to her." A furrow creased Marais's forehead as she recalled the haunted eyes and gray, twitching mouth. "She mustn't know about it for ever so long. Syd and I shall have to talk about that to-night."

All the way out to Sydney's on the Sacramento Street car she was so absorbed in the mesh of her thoughts that she had ridden two blocks past her destination before she knew it.

The brooding quiet of the night hovered along Vallejo Street. The whole block was deserted except for a machine drawn up in the shadow of some trees opposite the Dalrymple house. Two dim figures—a man and a woman—close together and low voices told their own story. "They've chosen a sheltered spot for their love-making, even if it is the street," thought Marais as she mounted Sydney's steps.

It seemed to her that Sydney, greeting her with

open arms, Sydney in the same white and gold gown, enveloped by the soft lamplight, was even more lovely, more graciously gentle than she had been the day before.

"Oh, Marais, I thought you'd never come. I've been dreaming all day. Quent hasn't come——"

A knock at the door interrupted her speech. Sydney's brows rose questioningly. The maid's apologetic face appeared in answer to her quick "Come in."

"A gentleman to see you, Mrs. Waynor. He wouldn't give his name. I don't think it can be Mr. Waynor, ma'am." The girl hesitated. "There's some one——"

"Wouldn't give his name," repeated Sydney, the light in her face fading into surprise. "That's queer. Did you tell him I wasn't seeing any one?"

Marais thought the girl's eyes looked curiously at Sydney. "Yes, ma'am. But he snapped his fingers and said, 'Damn it all, I've had a hard enough time finding the place. She's got to see me. I'm going up.' I told him he couldn't till I'd spoken to you."

With one bound Sydney was out of Marais's arms and in the middle of her room, her eyes on the door.

It swung abruptly open. A man stood there, a slender, young fellow with a frowning brow, thick, black hair, and a petulant mouth. His eyes went uncertainly from Sydney's white, glittering figure swaying slightly toward him, tall, slim, beautiful, her bosom heaving, her hands outstretched, to Marais wide-eyed and speechless on the couch. It seemed to her instead of joy in his glance it was heavy with resentment.

"Quent." Sydney's voice thrilled as Marais had

never heard it. "Quent." The word sang on the still air.

Marais rose awkwardly from the couch. "I must get out of here and leave these two together. It's a great moment for them, but I wish he wouldn't look so gloomy—so sort of defiant. I wonder if he was in that machine across the street. No, there was a woman with that man." She slipped into the hall with the vague idea of going in to see Mrs. Dalrymple. But something in the man's first words, muffled though they were by the shut door, held her motionless. She sank down on a chair of writhing teakwood dragons in a dimly alcoved corner sheltered by an elaborate Chinese screen. It was a lonely place, this upper hall filled with shadows. You might almost imagine some one was whispering and moving about down there at the other end. Marais repressed a shiver. Perhaps she was a fool to sit here. Any one—the servants happening along—would surely think she was trying to listen. Still she couldn't get rid of the feeling that Sydney might require her help. Better stay since she was here.

The two inside the closed door were evidently absorbed. For some time Sydney talked, her speech broken only by lower monosyllables from Quent. Then their voices rose and fell in duet, Sydney's expostulatory, protesting, anguished, Quent's a note of prolonged, unbroken obstinacy. Marais gripped the dragon's heads tightly. She heard Sydney swallowing strangled sobs.

A silence followed. Then the door was wrenched open with such force that the girl shrank back into her corner. Quent Waynor strode into the hall, stood a moment swinging his foot on the stair, and

then turned about. The light flooding through the open door fell on his sullen, flushed face and stubborn, protruding lower lip. He went swiftly to the open doorway.

"After all, Syd, it's unfair for me to be made to feel like a cad." His voice was edged with bitter self-justification. "You were the one to insist on our compact. I remember your very words. 'The first fellow that's tired has perfect freedom to clear out. And no squealing!'"

"Am I squealing, Quent?" Marais scarcely recognized the colorless tone for her friend's voice.

"Not out loud. But you think I'm the limit. What more can I do than offer to square things by marrying you?" He hurled emphasis into each word as if to convince her and himself by force.

"Nothing."

Marais saw him throw out his hand in baffled anger. "Of course I didn't dream of falling for Sonia. If I don't care for you any longer, and do care for her, God knows I can't help that, can I?"

"No," responded Sydney's monotone.

"And the fact that a baby's coming can't change my feelings."

Marais, listening now with all the intentness she could command, started at the sound of a groan. She'd been so absorbed she wasn't aware she had sighed like that. Would have sworn the sound came from some one else.

"I brought Sonia with me to-night so that everything would be square and above board."

"You're a good sport, Quent. Done everything up brown. It's all my fault, but I can't marry you

when—I've lost out. I'd rather die. Don't worry. Everything's all right, old dear."

Sydney comforting Quent. Marais's eyes blurred. When had that maternal note ever thrilled before in her tone? He seemed, however, only half appeased.

"Now go get Sonia. I want to see her." This time her voice was hard and cheerful like a staring sun in which there is no warmth.

He started with alacrity toward the stairs.

"Quent, don't say anything about—you know."

"Righto." The relief of a scene gotten over was in his tone and the quick sound of his descending footsteps.

Marais's eyes remained riveted on the half-open door. No sound came from the lighted space within. Yes, that rustle—that labored sigh—they seemed almost at her elbow. Why, she was so close to Sydney she could hear her breathe, yet separated from her by this wall of crisis.

Presently Quent came back up the stairs, bringing with him a tall, dark woman who held her head in insolent grace—the sculptress Sonia Merovitsch, of course. As she passed through the door, trailing a whiff of perfume, subtle and penetrating, Marais had a glimpse of Sydney's white, smiling face and outstretched hands.

"Glad to see you, Sonia. Quent tells me you are going to the Orient." Remarkable, the naturalness her voice had achieved. "You ought to have a great trip."

"It will be interesting," said the Russian in a slow treble.

"Sonia's mad about the East." The man spoke

with uneasy rapidity. "And I need a fresher angle in my work. It'll be great for both of us."

"Yes, you've always wanted to go." Sydney's voice.

They were all three still standing. Proud as they were of their sporting attitude, they had sense enough evidently not to wish to prolong the strain.

"What are your plans, Sydney?" Quent's effort to be casual made Marais grind her teeth. "Oh, Sydney, will they never go?" she found herself saying over and over again.

"Back to little old New York as soon as I can arrange things," laughed Sydney. "It's the only place for me."

"Well, Sonia, I've got a date," said Quent abruptly. "Coming along? Top of the world, Syd."

"Bon voyage, you two."

And they were gone. The door closed.

Marais sat rigid in her chair. In the silence of that unseen room she could picture Sydney standing, her wide, dead eyes staring at the ruin of her life's fabric. Such a high and glittering structure, reared upon a basis so frail and futile. Suddenly, without premonition, leaped into her mind that other picture which she had carried since the moonlit night long ago in the Lost Garden. Webb Hali-burton, alone, staring at the empty space in front of him as though he could not look his fill upon the ruin of his hopes. Why did she associate those two—Uncle Webb and Sydney? Was it that in their essential selves glowed the same reckless spark? Now as then she was afraid to intrude upon such

bitter privacy. She and Sydney were alone, and where was her courage to face her friend?

She rose softly. At the same instant there came a moan, the identical sound she had taken for her own emotion, for Sydney's heavy sigh. With the knowledge that it was a sob from some one at her elbow her body broke into a cold sweat.

"Marais." An uncanny whisper transfixed her where she stood. "Marais, Sydney's going to have a baby when she isn't married to Quent? Whoever heard of anything so ridiculous?"

A hand clutched her arm. A weird, gray face peered cunningly into hers. Mrs. Dalrymple! She must have crept from her bed at the sound of voices. Behind the screen she had listened, breathing hard, moaning. Had heard everything.

"The most ridiculous thing I ever heard in my life." She began shaking with strange chuckles. Then shriek after shriek of laughter filled the silent house. Marais attempted to hold the frail figure in its thin nightgown, but it rocked back and forth violently, gray hair flying wildly about its ashen face. "Sydney going to have a baby. And Quent said good-by. He said good-by like a major general."

The girl closed her eyes, still holding fast to the writhing woman. She heard the door fly open; but she did not look. John Wentworth's haunting fear for Sydney should have been centered on his daughter. Yet who would have dreamed of such strength in a creature so inept and gentle as Mrs. Dalrymple? Still she held on, gritting her teeth, the perspiration streaming from her forehead, peals of mindless laughter stunning her ears.

Suddenly the screams stopped. The thin figure

relaxed in her grasp, went limp, and slipped to the floor. Marais opened her eyes. Staring at the parchment face, the half-open blue lips, the fixed gaze, she laid Mrs. Dalrymple down. But she dared not let go of the arms which were like crumbling meal in her hands. It flashed fantastically through her mind as she crouched beside the still form that the moment she released her hold the tangible structure of the Wentworth family would sink like a collapsed balloon to the ground.

Then another sound broke the stillness—Sydney's voice. And Sydney was on her knees beside the shrunken figure. "Mother, mother, speak to me! Marais, I've killed her! Do you hear me? I've killed her, I tell you! She's dead."

She lifted the frail shoulders frantically and held the chalky face close to hers. But the eyes remained fixed. The head fell limply to one side, straining the cords of the scrawny neck.

At the sight of the countenance, of the horror fixed forever in those eyes, a jagged thought pierced Marais's whirling brain, tore its way through the tissues to her thought, and pinned itself in the innermost depths of her consciousness. She staggered to her feet.

"Yes," spoke her voice coldly, sounding to herself like that of a stranger, "She's dead. And if you'll excuse me, I've got to telegraph to my mother not to read the letter."

A roaring flood of blackness rushed along the corridor, engulfing her. She fell on her face across Sydney's feet. For the second time in her life Marais had fainted.

CHAPTER VI

ONE TELEGRAM AND THEN ANOTHER

WHEN Marais came to herself in that miserable first waking where remembering and forgetting are fused into one pain, she was lying on the bed in one of the Dalrymple guest rooms, the opal glow of the night light painting the satin walls and pale ceiling with ghostly shadows. She sat up breathing hard, her head swimming. There was something. What was it? Oh, yes, she remembered too well now. She shielded her face with her cold hands. Mrs. Dalrymple was dead, and Sydney said she had killed her. There was something else linked with Mrs. Dalrymple's death. Something she had to do. Right away. What was it?

All at once she knew. "My mother. My mother." Was out of bed, sobbing, and at the telephone on the bedside table. "I want to send a wire to Mrs. Augusta Plover, Oakleyville, California. . . This phone number? Filmore 1467. . . . The name (Oh, whose name shall I give?) Mrs. Sarah Dalrymple. . . . Yes, I'm ready. 'Do not read letter. Destroy it. Mrs. Dalrymple died last night. I am coming home to-day. Must see you. Love, Marais.'"

The door opened softly. "Excuse me, Miss Plover. I heard your voice." She recognized Dr. Haynes' deep tones.

She interrupted him shortly. "Just a moment.

Did you get that, central? 'I am coming home to-day. Can't wait to see you. Love, Marais.'

She leaned back, scarcely conscious that the doctor still stood there in the pale light, his keen face bent upon her in half apology. The dreadful weight on her chest that had sent her stumbling down at Sydney's feet—that was gone. She was going home when it was light—the dawn she could see through the buff shades was already breaking—on the very first train that could get her to Oakleyville and her mother.

He was speaking again. "I'm sorry, Miss Plover; but I don't believe it's advisable for you to go home to-day. Unless it's really imperative."

Marais whirled about in her chair. "But I've got to." She clenched her hands. Plenty of strength now to fight for what she was going to do. "It's the most important thing in the world. I'm going to see my mother. Who'll keep me?" she challenged him fiercely.

His voice was quiet. "Mrs. Waynor is ill. Her mother's death has been a fearful shock. She keeps calling for you. Perhaps if you stay you can quiet her——"

Marais's hands fell at her sides. Of course she couldn't leave Sydney—after her scene with Quent Waynor and her mother's death. Not when she was in this condition. And yet—how could she stay?

"Just now——" His eyes met her haggard, tortured ones.

Sydney had told him about the child, then.

"After the funeral, if you feel you must go, it will probably be quite safe," he went on. "But now

it isn't wise to take chances. And you as her best friend——”

Suddenly her intense desire to keep Mrs. Plover from reading the letter she had mailed her not more than twelve hours before, the yearning to go home, to be under the same roof with her mother, which had been just now like a flame warming and lighting her heart, flickered into grayness. The hands of the living, the unborn, and the dead held her back. A great gulf yawned between her and her mother which, struggle as she might, she could never cross. Her legs were heavy as lead, her head ached horribly. She sagged where she stood. Two days. Time enough for her mother to learn the letter by heart. And she couldn't be there to explain that it was all a mistake, that she wasn't going with Gil—in case Mrs. Plover didn't get the telegram before she opened the letter. Oh, it was impossible. She couldn't stay.

She grasped the back of the chair near which she stood. “Do—you consider Mrs. Waynor dangerously ill?” She moistened her lips.

Dr. Haynes ran his hand over the top of his head uncertainly. “Not dangerous, but she's exhausting herself calling for you.”

“It won't be long, Miss Marais. See here,” he laid his hand kindly on her arm, “you mustn't take it so hard. Mrs. Dalrymple was bound to go off this way. Her heart's been behaving badly for some time. And Mrs. Waynor will be all right after the excitement is over. I've telegraphed for Mr. Wentworth. And everything is taken care of. Can't you send for your mother? You really need somebody to be looking after you.”

Marais swallowed a hopeless sob. How little he knew what she needed, what she wanted desperately to do as she had never wanted to do anything—and was tied helpless to the post of to-day and to-morrow. She went to the window and rolled up the shade, staring out upon an unfamiliar world, the sky all shredded with sickly clouds through which the rising sun cast a wan eye on dead water, a clutter of houses, and pale outlines of hills fading into the dirty-colored mist.

Yet when she entered Sydney's room—saw the ashen face from which youth had been ruthlessly wiped quiver into life, felt the hot, restless hands cling to her cold ones as if they would never let her go, while the dry lips whispered, "Marais, I can't get her face out of my mind. It presses in on me from every corner of the room. You won't leave me, will you? I'm all alone," she was somberly glad she had decided to stay. And sinking on her knees beside her friend, the strange weight clamping itself again upon her heart, she whispered, "I shall not leave you, Sydney dearest."

Gil Sommer-in-dyke came about noon. Marais had avoided seeing John Wentworth except for a moment during which she recognized that he had forgotten all about their encounter on the campus in his fear at being brought face to face with death. "It's awful, Marais. Isn't it? Death, I mean," he whispered, clutching her arm. Observing his blanched lips which moved even when he did not speak, she knew he was consumed with fear and self-pity. Sydney's condition did not disturb him. His daughter's death left him untouched except as it indicated that he, too, might be taken one day. The

girl was relieved to make the excuse that she couldn't leave Sydney's bedside. But when the pert Annette brought Gil's card to Sydney's door, she went downstairs where he was waiting for her in the middle of the drawing-room floor.

He turned a shade paler as his eyes searched her face. While he was telling her in his quiet voice that he had arrived in Berkeley that morning, had found her out, had phoned to the Dalrymple house, learned of the tragedy and come immediately across the bay, she struggled with the sorry consciousness that she hadn't thought of him till that instant. Was aware that he looked grave and white and that in his eyes contended a mixture of love and pity.

But when he moved toward her, she spoke. "The funeral is to-morrow."

He stopped as if she had lifted both hands to push him back. "Yes, Haynes told me."

"After that I'm going home. I've wired my mother," Marais said tonelessly.

Into his brown eyes which had looked upon many illusions and their shattering she saw that look of irony blended with sadness which had tantalized her curiosity in the past. Now it made no difference. She had no will to explain to him why she wasn't going with him to Santa Barbara—now or ever. Couldn't have explained it in terms of reason even if she hadn't been so tired that her body was a log and her mind a blurred patch of nothingness, except for one burning spot in its gray waste—her desire to go home, to see for herself that her mother's face wasn't shrunken, that she stood as stalwart, as stern, as unflinching, as real as ever. Oh, she wanted

her without a single softening of the stern judge's eye, without a lowering of the admonitory finger.

Gil opened his lips as though to say one thing. Other words came. "I'll go with you and Mr. Wentworth to the funeral, Marais. Haynes says Syd must keep quiet. Is there anything I can do for you in Berkeley?"

"If Sydney's better, I'm going over the first thing this afternoon. Thank you for being so good to me, Gil. And now I must go back. She doesn't like to be left alone a moment."

It was because Sydney refused to let Marais out of her sight that the girl failed to receive the telegram from Cousin Jaquith until the next morning, just before time to go to the Gray undertaking parlors where Mrs. Dalrymple's funeral service was to be held. She tore it open while Gil waited—John Wentworth having gone ahead in solitary state—her fingers trembling so she could scarcely decipher the words dancing on the yellow page. She read it through twice, then handed it to him, watching him haggardly as he went over it aloud in his steady voice. "Your mother is pretty sick. She didn't want you to know. We think you had better come. Love, Jaquith."

"This comes of waiting," she said dully.

All night she had tossed and thrashed, chafing against her delay in going to Oakleyville, wondering for the hundredth time whether her mother had read the letter or whether the telegram had prevented that. After she had counted innumerable sheep jumping over ditches, she had fallen asleep, but her mother's face, wan and pinched, had floated above her, that stern, reproachful look in her eyes, and she

had awakened half sobbing, "I've gotten all mixed up with what Sydney told me about how she's haunted by her mother's face. Oh, will morning never come?"

And now it had come, and brought this ominous confirmation of her feverish dreams and her heavy fears. She was dumbly grateful for Gil's tact in not trying to soothe her savage suspense. On the way to the undertaker's he busied himself running his eye up and down the finely printed columns of a time-table.

"There's a train out of Oakland Mole at five-thirty. The five o'clock boat from San Francisco will make connections. You'll be in Oakleyville by—let me see—eight to-night. Not so bad."

"But suppose the service lasts later than five?" she asked him gauntly.

"You mustn't go to the Crematory." His voice was quietly determined. "It's enough for Mr. Wentworth to be there."

She didn't go. When the smaller hand of the Ferry Building clock pointed at five, she and Gil were on the Southern Pacific boat, and at half past the hour Marais sank into the corner of a red plush seat in her train.

"You've been so good," she said to Gil, giving him her hand. "Forgive me if I haven't talked. I couldn't." She turned away from him abruptly, her face working.

"I told you we'd make it on time, didn't I?" he demanded cheerfully. Then he pressed her hand hard and swung off the platform just as the train began slowly to move.

Marais leaned her head against the back of the

seat and closed her eyes. She could shut out the winter sunset sparkling over the water like rosy wine, the sky's gray veil rimmed with mauve and gold, the abruptly red, stony cliff sides the train grazed, the smoke-filled stations they passed until the blanket of darkness tucked closely in about the flat marshland of Suisun, and finally the rolling floor of the Sacramento Valley. But she couldn't keep her weary, tense mind from turning round and round in unison with the revolutions of the train's iron wheels. Indeed, she didn't try not to. Encouraged its idle busyness to keep it off the details of Mrs. Dalrymple's funeral and the fearful uncertainty of what she would find at home.

What was the verse Uncle Webb long time ago had told her Mark Twain couldn't help but repeat whenever he listened to the rhythm of a moving train?

A blue-trip slip for an eight-cent fare,
 A buff-trip slip for a six-cent fare,
 A pink-trip slip for a three-cent fare,
 Punch in the presence of the passenjare.
 Punch, brother, punch with care.
 Punch in the presence of the passenjare.

But it did no good to repeat the foolish doggerel over and over, for between the words leered the questions she was trying desperately to shut out of her mind. "A blue trip slip"—How was mother by this time?—"for an eight cent fare,"—Had she read the letter or did the telegram get there in time? "A buff trip slip for a six cent fare,"—What had caused her illness? Had the letter—

Marais pressed her burning cheek against the cold

car window. Her mind mustn't run on that way. But through another door of her thought slid the monotonous intoning of the minister at Mrs. Dalrymple's funeral, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." She heard the refrain:

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide,
The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide.

She saw the heavy metal casket smothered in its violet pall. "Oh, mother, mother, this train is just crawling."

"The darkness deepens." She bit her lip hard and moved close to the cool glass. They must be well past Suisun by this time. For a long while she kept her eyes plunged into the blackness outside. How drowsy the heat made one. She could hardly keep her eyes open. She straightened up. Now they were wide enough. For whose black eyes were shining into hers from the glass? Who in the world threw the blob of hair out of his face in that way but Dan. There he stood smiling at her, his hand outstretched, that rough, tender, commanding smile on his strong face, drawing her. "Don't worry, Marais. Everything's all right with your mother. She's a fine woman. I'm glad we gave you that surprise." His voice broke in that eager way it did sometimes when he talked to her.

"Dan, Dan!" she heard herself cry out and started up, to find the brakeman swinging through the car, shouting, "Davis. Change for Oakleyville and all points north."

A relief to stretch herself after two hours of sitting in one position and her brief nap—of course it had been a dream—to get out of the stifling coach

and cross in the sharp night to the track where the smelly, little gasoline train with its opalescent lights like Sydney's night lamp waited. It was easier now to think of her mother. Ten minutes, fifteen at the outside, and she'd be at home. Would know exactly how she was getting on. Could look into her strong face—wouldn't it be odd to see her in bed? She could never remember such a sight—and hear her firm voice. She was glad Cousin Jaquith was there. She wouldn't leave a single thing undone. Young John would be like a lost sheep with his mother in bed—poor lad. When she was better Marais would set herself to becoming acquainted with him. It was a shame she knew so little of his likes and dislikes, his longings, his ambitions, when at bottom she was really interested in him—proud of his quick mind and fiery spirit.

"Oakleyville," bellowed the brakeman, and the gasoline tug steamed to a standstill.

She stepped down on the platform, a blur of faces swimming before her in the station lights. Out of them emerged Abner Jewett, red and solemn looking, bigger and more important than she had remembered him. Selling shoes at a continuous profit must have done that. She wondered vaguely if it had helped the squeak in his voice.

He came forward awkwardly and took her suitcase.

"How is she?" She had not meant to put the question so sharply, but why did he stand there without a word?

He put out his hand as if to touch her arm. "Marais——"

She noted wildly that the squeak was still in his

voice. Over his shoulder she caught a glimpse of Muggy Abshire waiting by his hack, tears dripping over his ratlike features.

“Abner—is she—” The whisper died in her throat.

He nodded dumbly, his little eyes blinking at her in mournful kindness.

Of what use was kindness now?

CHAPTER VII

“MARAIS WILL STAY”

COUSIN JAQUITH opened the front door. The strange odor of disinfectants smote Marais's nostrils. She had a glimpse of Young John, a colt of a lad, his face swollen and blotched, shrinking back into the living-room where two or three persons talked in low tones, of Theodore's squat figure lurking near the dining-room door. She felt the pressure of Cousin Jaquith's kind hand upon her arm, guiding her into the small, unused parlor. The door closed softly behind her.

She didn't need the dim gaslight to show her where every object in the room stood. She knew the upright Steck piano on which her father used to pick out hymnal tunes Sunday afternoons stood cate-cornered next to the fireplace. That the stiff rosewood parlor set upholstered in faded pink roses—the two straight chairs and the one rocker—were arranged triangularly about the marble-topped table holding the big Bible, Dante's "Inferno," illustrated by Doré, and the cut-glass vase her mother had won at the bridge tournament at John Wentworth's. Only one change had been made. The hard sofa, a match to the chairs, which always stood in the bay window, had been replaced by a flat couch on which Mrs. Plover lay as if asleep.

Marais stood for a long time looking down at her

mother's closed eyes and silent lips firmer than ever in death. The people from Dwight Brockett's undertaking parlors had done their work and gone away. She lay dressed in her seemly, black silk, a bunch of white roses clasped in her fingers which had spent so little time holding blossoms. Already her features bore that strange sculpt look which is the gift of death.

The daughter's eyes were dry. Back of them blisters rose and fell in her mind, but for all their smoldering she was numb. She looked for some time upon the noble profile which bore a likeness to the picture of Grandfather Haliburton over the fireplace as well as the Stuart portrait of George Washington. More of the man than the woman in the height and breadth of that brow, the chin's strong modeling, the nose's fine arch, and the strength of that long upper lip. This was not her mother. It was the carved effigy of courage, fortitude, unflinching loyalty to an ideal. Between them the great gulf was certainly fixed. All feverish desire to know what had caused her mother's death, why it had been so swift, whether she had read the letter, was hushed in the presence of this stranger whose eyes had opened upon secrets which touched her earthly lineaments to a remote majesty.

After a time the spots in the girl's mind which had throbbed all the way home from the station with Abner and Muggy no longer burned in the heat of desperate curiosity. What difference now whether her mother had read the letter and the telegram too? Nothing could ever disturb the calm she had attained. It was a blessing that she herself could keep her self-control.

Then her eyes caught sight of a piece of the padding her mother always wore to hold up her high, smooth pompadour. A careless hand had failed to do its work perfectly. The first time the frayed edges had ever showed through the thick, grizzled hair.

All of a sudden the smoldering blisters burst into beating waves which crashed through her numbness, drenching her with realization, with terror, with anguish. Her mother, gone forever——

She fell to her knees beside the still, black figure. "Come back, mother; come back. Let's begin all over again."

When she came out of the parlor an hour later, Young John was no longer to be seen. She knew he had crept to bed to avoid meeting her. The neighbors had also gone. Just Jaquith remained, kind Cousin Jaquith, grown plump and smooth and settled looking, but weary now and worn with watching. From her Marais learned, listening without speaking a word, to how Mrs. Plover had caught cold fussing in the garden. "I must stop now. Young John and I are going to work in the garden. The reason your father had such luck with flowers was because he was eternally working with them." It had run into pneumonia and she had gone with terrific swiftness.

"She hadn't been like herself for quite a while. Ever since before she went to Berkeley to visit you. Once I thought I'd write you. But you were so busy——"

Still Marais couldn't speak. It was Jaquith with a husband, children, and a home on her hands who had been her mother's real daughter.

Jaquith went on: "She wouldn't let me send for you. We all kept thinking she'd get better, with her wonderful constitution. But when we saw she wasn't going to rally, Abner said we should telegraph."

"I didn't get the message till this morning." Was it only a dozen hours since she had stood in the Dalrymple drawing-room while Gil read the words which had quivered illegibly before her eyes on the yellow page?

Jaquith's leaf-brown eyes were soft with compassion as they rested upon Marais, outside the circle of the living-room droplight, the shadow casting that tragic band across her forehead, every line of her body stony with wretchedness.

"One thing will help you, Marais," she said solemnly. "That telegram you sent night before last—I opened it. Of course I didn't let Aunt Augusta see it. The news about Mrs. Dalrymple would have made her fever higher. But I read her the part where you said you were coming home, and that you couldn't wait to see her, just as if it were the whole message." Two tears brimmed over Cousin Jacquith's eyes and fell unheeded into her lap. "I wish you could have seen her face. I never saw Aunt Augusta smile that way before. 'She's a good girl. She'll always do what's right,' was all she said, and that was a whisper, for her lungs had already begun to fill up." She rose abruptly and went upstairs.

In a few moments during which Marais held her hands tightly folded and said over and over to herself, "She didn't know, she didn't know," and the only sound in the room was the wheezy ticking of

John Plover's clock which the church choir had given him so long ago, she returned carrying a sealed envelope. "Here's the letter you sent her. I kept it locked in the secretary drawer until I could give it to you myself."

Long after Cousin Jaquith had gone home and Abner and Hay Spinkham who were to sit up had taken off their shoes and made themselves comfortable in the living-room, Marais sat by her bedroom window, where once long ago she had thrilled to Dan's serenade, too tired to think, too wide awake to sleep. Finally she put on her coat, stole downstairs and out the front door. The night was dark as a bowl of blackberry wine, the moon beyond the Wentworth oaks hid by a belt of clouds. Against the scattered powder of stars her father's palm tree spiked its fan-shaped leaves coldly. As she moved slowly around the quiet house her eyes scanned the outlines of the garden, blurred and blanketed by the gloom. She knew its every detail, but her mind was too beaten to picture the frost-bitten deadness of the lawn on one side of her, the staked-up chrysanthemums on the other. Vaguely she was thankful for the darkness, somewhere in her a feeling that no puny flame should flicker on the night her mother was treading her pilgrimage along the aisles of eternal light.

Mechanically she felt her feet on the square of brick at the bottom of the kitchen steps. She sank down on the lowest one and buried her drumming temples in her hands. "You've longed to be free. Well, freedom has come. Except for Young John you're all alone." Without a soul in the world to lift a finger in reproof or criticism.

A long sigh from somewhere close at hand hung on the darkness like a cloud of sound, curdling her blood with terror. There was a shuffling movement on the steps. She opened her lips to scream, but remained paralyzed, her attempt futile.

"Marais." At the shuddering whisper she knew it was Theodore and leaned weakly against the wall, the sweat starting from her forehead and hands.

"What is it, Theodore?" Her eyes could discern his figure near the opposite wall.

"I jest can't get over it about her," he muttered. "You'll never know how near I come to committin' suicide this afternoon. I went into Higgin's hardware store and looked at guns." He sniffed.

Marais had no reply for this testimony of sorrow.

"She's the best friend I ever had. Never will I ferget standin' here on these bricks the mornin' after she let me stay all night in the woodshed, lookin' up at her on the other side of the wire door. 'How kin I ever thank you, ma'am?' sez I. 'I was a stranger an' you took me in.' She got that twinkle in her eye. 'Oh, no,' says she. 'I was a stranger, an' you took *me* in.' She was the finest woman in the county, an' the smartest—your mother."

"Yes, Theodore." Marais rose to put an end to the talk.

"There's somepin you'd ought to know." His voice, lowered to a more confidential note, held her unwillingly. "I went in to see her a minute this mornin'. She knowed I'd been crying'. An' she says in that awful whisper, 'Don't worry, Theodore, Marais'll stay an' look after things.' She felt she was a-goin' to die. That's why she said them words to me, 'Marais'll stay an' look after things.' "

In the silence which followed, Marais forgot Theodore's crouching mournfulness. With a strange flutter of her frozen heart, as if it were touched to life by a long-awaited-for message, she was listening to that hoarse, feeble voice, "Marais'll stay and look after things."

CHAPTER VIII

MARAIS'S ANSWER

WHEN she crept between the clean sheets of her bed that night Marais murmured, "You're not here to say good night, mother, but you've spoken to me all the same. I'm going to stay."

Having made her decision she went ahead, apparently unconscious of the flurry of curiosity her action occasioned among Mrs. Plover's friends. The roomers stayed on as though nothing had happened. As she lacked her mother's genius for cooking, she let the trade with Hay Spinkham's delicatessen go. But the rapid growth of the high school made the members of the board glad to appoint her as assistant in the English department for the spring term. She wondered if they did it as a gesture of approval because she had chosen to stay in Oakleyville—"to stick by the ship," as she heard Jerg Robbins had expressed it.

Young John was her hardest problem. For weeks after her mother's death she found it impossible to break the shell of his reserve. Her encouragement to him from the back door on Saturday morning when he set out with his *Posts* in the linen bag strapped across his shoulder met with no response.

"Hope you'll have the best luck ever, Johnbo," she would call, striving to put into different words Mrs. Plover's spirit of encouragement, at the same

time thinking how big he was to be selling the *Post*. That was a small boy's job.

"Hope so," he invariably muttered, without looking up as he settled his cap more firmly over his sullen brows.

And Marais's gaze would grow dim when she recalled the pugnacious sparkle in his red-brown eye in return to his mother's proud smile and her, "Good luck to you, son," with just the right accent on the "to."

In the evenings after dinner when they were seated on either side of the dining-room table with their books she caught him several times looking across at her with smoldering resentment. As if he said, "If you think you're going to take my mother's place, you're mistaken. I don't know you. And I don't want to." When he met her eye, he shuffled his long legs and turned away quickly.

But one night as he was muttering over his difficulties in cube root, she laid aside the book she was reading and went and looked over his shoulder at the smudgy figures on the paper.

"What's the matter?" she asked him in a matter-of-fact way.

"Dunno," growled the lad, keeping his face over his example.

Without a word she sat down beside him and worked out the problem. The obstinate line of his mouth—the wide, Haliburton mouth with the long upper lip, Marais had noticed many times—broke into an unwilling grin.

"Gee, but you're a whiz," he said in envious admiration. "I didn't know you could do that. Wish I could."

"You can," laughed Marais, her heart leaping at the first concession he had made. Now was the time to win his further confidence while the barrier of reserve was down. She sauntered back to her chair. "There's something I've been thinking about for quite a while." Her casual tone belied the thick beating of her heart. She hadn't realized how she yearned to gain the love of this tall, young brother. "What do you think about giving up selling the *Post*?"

He blinked in astonishment. "Why?" he demanded.

"Don't you think you're getting too big for that sort of a job?"

His face suddenly glowed to his hair. "You bet," he blurted out; "but what can I do instead?" It seemed to her he was on the verge of tears. She knew by the moisture in his eyes just how lonely he'd been for his mother, how hungry for somebody to talk things out with.

"Jerg Robbins told me the other day he'd like to have some boy take care of his horses at the wood yard." She must step carefully. One couldn't be offhand enough with such skittishness.

"How much'll he pay?"

"Fifteen a month."

"Gee, that's fine," he exclaimed, his eyes shining. "I've felt like a baby tagging those papers around."

Marais's coup d'état had won her Young John's respect and liking. But even in their later comradeship she knew there was never to be the bond between them that had held him and his mother so closely together. She didn't expect that. It could exist only between a mother and son.

She had never worked so hard in her life as she did during the months following Mrs. Plover's death. Young John kept the wood box filled and swept the walks. Theodore, who had a job in the Southern Pacific warehouse down by the railroad, did the dishes and took care of the garden. But she had the meals to cook, the house to keep in order, and the roomers' wants to look after, as well as her school work to do. Under the strenuous schedule of her days she grew as lean as a greyhound. When Cousin Jaquith worried about her thinness, Marais showed her the muscles of her arm, and said, "It's work that has saved me. I'm not ready to slacken up yet. And I certainly don't look sick, do I?"

She smiled into her cousin's gentle face, and Jaquith, searching the vivid countenance in which the long gray eyes glowed darkly beneath the chestnut crown, and the soft color came and went, was forced to admit that though Marais was changed, she looked healthy enough. Between the two a quiet friendship had sprung up. It was a comfort for Marais to talk to Jaquith whose mind was as clear of criticism as is a mountain stream of taint. She was the only person to whom the girl ever mentioned her mother. She found it easy enough to write out her thoughts in the little, blue leather diary she kept locked in her desk. Everything—ideas, vagrant images, conclusions drawn from her recent sharp experiences—went down on the finely ruled pages. But when it came to expressing these intimate, fugitive ideas to people she was speechless, except to Jaquith.

They were sitting together in Mrs. Plover's sitting-room late one afternoon when Marais first

broke her silence regarding her mother. She spoke abruptly and without preface.

"Strange, isn't it, now that my mother isn't here, except everywhere in the house as my father is in the garden, how much closer I am to her than I ever was before."

Jaquith looked at her with quiet impartiality. "No, I don't think it's strange. You two never understood one another very well."

"No," observed Marais sadly. "I'm just beginning to get a glimpse of the things that were real to her and the reasons why. Her duty was her ideal. Nothing else counted. Her whole life lay in its performance. She went straight to the heart of things. The very sternness of her necessity kept her motives unmixed. If I'd been like my grandfather and her—had had the necessity of making a town or a family, I wouldn't have spent so much time thinking about freedom and chasing shadows."

"I used to think Aunt Augusta was too hard on you," Jacquith spoke with mildness.

Marais broke in passionately. "All the same I see now that my mother's discipline had its use. In times of choice it stands at my elbow pointing the way. I shall never escape the effects of her training, and I'm glad of it."

But there were some subjects on which she never spoke to her cousin, one of them being Sydney. Sydney and her problem disturbed her more than she would admit. She knew that she was staying on in the Vallejo Street house. "How can I bear to think of her in that lonely place with ghosts walking in every room?" she said to herself over and over. "If she can't go to New York on account of business

to be settled—though that's odd when Mr. Wentworth has gone abroad for six months—she oughtn't to stay there alone. I wish I could persuade her to come to Oakleyville, especially while her grandfather's away. We'd have a wonderful visit."

But Sydney steadily refused Marais's invitations, and though her letters came with fair regularity, each one was so vague regarding her movements, her reasons for staying on in San Francisco, her plans that it was evident she wished to keep them to herself. And every page flung out a note of bitter recklessness. "There's something wrong," Marais murmured after reading each letter.

When Gil Sommer-in-dyke came to Oakleyville before sailing for Italy in May, he gave her one reason for Sydney's lingering in San Francisco—a reason which, instead of allaying her fear, only succeeded in heightening it. They were walking in the garden in the evening. Theodore, watering the young plants, had barely escaped giving Gil a wetting. Marais watched him uneasily, conscious of his jealous guardianship of her and his scornful dislike of the "city guy." The scent of sprouting leaves and violets in the April grass flung a delicate veil over the girl in her white gown and Gil browner for his weeks in Santa Barbara, more informal and detached than ever in his loose flannels, yet with an unwontedly eager spark lighting his eye.

In answer to Marais's quick inquiry for Sydney he was silent while he stooped to pick a pansy for his buttonhole. When he spoke it was with more deliberation than usual. "She's amusing herself with Preston Marbury. I think it's only in order to forget about her mother and Quent."

So that was why she was staying on in San Francisco, why she didn't come to Oakleyville. Marais wished devoutly she'd told her—as she had so many times intended—about Preston. “He'd like nothing better than to win Sydney and incidentally the Wentworth money.” But in her present, reckless mood, she probably wouldn't listen to a word.

“I blundered in on a tête-à-tête in front of the fire one night when I ran out to cheer Syd up,” Gil went on. “And she was so angry at my intrusion that I haven't been back since. I wish she'd come to you for a while, Marais. She's not looking like herself.” A good deal for Gil to say.

Marais made no reply.

“Syd will find herself. We must give her time. But I wish she'd play around with some one besides Marbury.” Thus Gil closed the subject, turning his eyes in whimsical appraisement upon the girl beside him. “Oakleyville agrees with you, Marais. You've changed a bit.”

“How, Gil?”

“Oh, grown up. If I were to write a description of you into one of my yarns, I'd say, ‘The weeks had carved changes in the clear oval of her face. It was more mature. There was composure on the white brow and in the nicked corners of the scarlet lips. She was a woman now, confident of her power, but aware also of the forces with which one must be prepared to wrestle.’ That is, I'd write it that way if I weren't an apostle of naturalism.” He smiled mischievously. “By the way, how is the novel coming on?”

Marais shook her head. “Not at all. What time has a hard-working woman for novel writing? I'm

too busy living and seeing, these days, to spend time in writing."

"Seeing?"

"Yes. For the first time I'm seeing Oakleyville as it really is—as I think my grandfather probably saw it. Mighty interesting, too. He must have been a very happy man—with his work cut out for him—seeing it grow under his very hands. The town needed a church. Very well. He helped to build it. A school was necessary. He drew the plans and raised money for its erection. Self-sacrifice and achievement were team mates in those days. I think my father and mother must have felt about this home as he did about the town. It was the beginning of their dreams—a city not made with hands."

"Do you you think you'd be willing to stay here always, Marais?" She felt Gil's eyes searching her face.

"No, after Young John finishes high school, we'll probably go to Berkeley," she returned thoughtfully. "But I'll come back here from time to time to renew myself in the remembrance of my people's fortitude and their strength. If Uncle Webb could have glimpsed what they saw, things might have been different for him. But he grew to hate Oakleyville—and so did I for a while. It will never be impossible to me again. My family lived and worked and saw visions here. I was born here, and in some strange way the anchor of my life is here. It's the pool from which I shall drink again and again to refresh myself."

Gil looked at her reminiscently. "Do you remember what I once told you, Marais? That you're no modern."

The warm color swept her cheeks. "You're a prophet with honor, Gil. I know now that I'm a chip off the old block. I've been playing hide and seek with duty all my life. It's only people completely indifferent to its demands who are really modern. If I could look at life biologically instead of morally—but I can't. I'll never be a real modern."

Then Gil, taking care that the squat, antagonistic figure of Theodore had disappeared around the house, startled Marais by asking her to marry him.

"I don't care whether you're modern or not. I suppose Helen of Troy wasn't modern in one sense. But I'll bet she'd be as appealing to-day as she was to Menelaus and Paris. I find that even my philosophy isn't proof against you, Marais. And that's going some. I can't get you out of my system. All those days in Santa Barbara I found myself wishing you were there to give things the tang of real living. They were flat and stale without you. I'm aching to be enslaved by matrimony. Will you go with me to Europe? You can drink of the Pierian Spring there and then come back and look at your reflection in Oakleyville's pool." The lightness of his tone was belied by his intent look upon her.

Marais raised her eyes to the purpling twilight heavens. A faint radiance still lingered on the horizon. Between the spiked leaves of her father's palm tree trembled the hesper star. She knew all that Gil's offer implied: the leisurely traveling to visit the spots of which she had read and dreamed; a white villa hidden by orange groves above the Bay of Naples on whose sun-drenched veranda the friends of Gil would sit and chat, would drift away

and be replaced by other friends; the return to New York where they would settle down to work each loved. And Gil himself, sensitive, civilized, and loving her as she knew he did from the fire in his dreamy, brown eye and the flush which illumined his face.

Why shouldn't she go with him? Nothing to hold her except Young John, and they could manage about him. Nothing except the one spark that fired her veins, the feeling that made her one with the sun, moon, and stars and the earth, in their eternal round, that made the soft, boundless sky of spring, the flowing, balmy air, the sudden warmth of the sun sweeter and more poignant than they had ever been before, that was the wellspring of her tears and her laughter.

She felt the sting of tears under her eyelids. A wave of emotion like the dying away of a rich strain of music flashed along golden strings. She turned resolutely toward him, her face pale in the gathering dusk.

"But Gil, dear, I can't; because I love some one else."

His brow contracted as though the words, welded at their utterance into a thin, silver dart, had pierced his heart. Then he took her hands and kissed each one gently.

"Do you mind telling me who it is, Marais?"

She looked through the glimmer of tears on his bowed head.

"You know," she murmured.

"Stillman?"

She nodded.

He sighed, smiled, then shrugged a little. She

thought she knew what that gesture meant. After all there were his books, the unexplored places of the world, his friends, his freedom.

“A fine chap. You’ll be happy with him—now. Because you know, dear, you’re different—softer, a little more elastic.”

Marais shook her head. “No, Gil. Dan’s in Russia. He isn’t coming back.”

CHAPTER IX

THE SHADOWY CURTAIN

THEN Sydney came back to Oakleyville. Three days after Gil had told her good-by, Marais, standing on the front steps looking for Young John at dinner time, caught a glimpse of a tall, golden-haired figure in a straight, black gown, strolling along one of the garden paths beyond the Wentworth fence. Sydney!

With a gasp the girl ran down the steps, then stopped as suddenly as she had started. Something in that solitary figure forbade her to follow the choking rush of her whole being toward Sydney. Something beside the iron fence formed a wall between them. She turned slowly about and went in the house. And presently, when Sydney was no longer to be seen moving among the trees, she seated herself at the telephone.

Yes, Sydney's voice rippled over the wire almost as it used to, she had come up unexpectedly. Deadly tired of San Francisco and everything there. "Thank goodness," thought Marais, "that means she's given Preston Marbury his walking papers." Her grandfather was returning from his European trip in three days. It seemed too bad for him to come back to an empty house. She would stay for a week. Then she was going on to New York—and parts unknown. Here the listener's face sharpened with apprehension at the hard laugh. And

when was she to see Marais? Ridiculous to be talking over the phone when they were just across the street from one another. Couldn't she come to dinner? She'd have old Wong lay places for two, if she could make him understand. He got deafer and deafer every day. Well, then, if not that, come as soon as she had finished eating. Not an instant later. Right up to her room. The front door would be open.

As Marais walked in the May twilight around the stone driveway, watching absently the faintly moving curtains of ivy festooning the oaks beneath which the dancing Pan flung crystal drops from his pipes, she tried to assure herself that Sydney wouldn't be changed. From the old days, yes. She'd had enough to change her with the baby coming, Quent's going to the Orient with the Russian woman, and her mother's death. But not changed since Marais had last seen her. Her voice had been quite natural except for that note of hardness, and she was evidently eager for a visit.

The girl paused in the big, silent hall where once the Hawaiian orchestra had planged plaintive melodies on their ukuleles, and now the musty smell of dead, unbreathed atmosphere hung over everything, then ran up the parquetry stairs and to the lighted door of the bedroom Sydney always transformed with her toilet paraphernalia when she stayed at her grandfather's.

Sydney met her with the old, impulsive rush, drew her to the couch in the bay window piled high with her own tawny satin cushions, took her face between her soft, ringed hands, and asked a dozen questions in one breath. How had she been? What was she

doing? Was she working too hard? Yes, she was. No use to deny it. She was much thinner. How did she and Young John make it? And was she going to spend the rest of her days in Oakleyville instead of marrying one of her suitors? Oh, oh, no use for Marais to blush and pretend she didn't know what Sydney meant. Everybody knew that Gil had gone to Italy disconsolate. And whatever had she done to big, glowering Dan, sending him off to the ends of the earth?

After she had gone home and was preparing for bed, Marais decided that only for one moment had Sydney opened the door she had shut between them. Her very beauty was that of a stranger, fuller, more mature, and coldly brittle, with flashes of furious restlessness in the quiver of her nostrils and the tap of her slipper, as though the coating of ice hid dark currents which foamed constantly below the surface, and must be lulled by talk. She had talked much and about a great many things. But when Marais had touched her cold hand and ventured something about the child, Sydney had stared at her and veered abruptly from the subject. At the mention of the word "freedom" she had broken into that laugh like cracking glass, and flung out, "Freedom! What bunk is tied up in that word."

When Marais rose to go, she, too, stood up, tall and straight and coldly haggard. Then suddenly, without a moment of warning, her arms were about Marais's neck, her head was hidden on her friend's shoulder. "Oh, Marais, darling," she murmured, and in the muffled sobs Marais thought she caught the words, "How can I go on?" An instant—and she was standing erect again, as though nothing

had happened, was talking very fast. "You've simply got to dine with me to-morrow night, dearest. Let Young John and Theodore get their own dinner. You surely don't like to think of me sitting down all alone—except for ghosts."

As Marais got into bed she thought, "Not a word about Preston Marbury. I hope she's sent him about his business. And she undoubtedly has." In her hand was the little, blue, leather book in which she recorded her thoughts. She took up her fountain pen. The flame from the lamp beside her pillow threw a yellow glow on her chestnut braids and thoughtful eyes beneath the broad forehead. For a long time she stayed motionless; then she wrote:

"Sydney and Uncle Webb grow more and more one in my thoughts. How they both once satisfied the wild longings in my heart! Sydney makes faces at the restraints life imposes on her just as Uncle Webb did. But something has happened to me. I'm beginning to make faces at myself. When Sydney says, 'Freedom is bunk,' I believe she is right. Once I thought there was such a thing as freedom. I believed I could find it outside my self—in opposition to my mother, in my secret meetings with Preston, in getting away from Oakleyville, in companionship with the boys at the office, perhaps in love. Now I know there's no approach to freedom except in making terms with yourself. Nothing outside of you makes much difference. After all, you're alone with what you are. Mother told me that my grandfather used to say to her, 'My daughter, you can't get away from yourself.' It's true."

"I wish Sydney could see this as I do." She studied the words while she screwed the cap on her

pen. "I wonder what she's going to do with her life." If one could only help her.

The following afternoon, an oppressive day in which the leaves hung dead in the first heat of summer and a dull mist shimmered over the Coast Range, Marais was detained so long at a teacher's meeting that she feared she'd be late for her dinner engagement with Sydney at six-thirty. All day Sydney had been in her mind—Sydney's added maturity of figure, the shadows beneath her brown eyes, the lines of bitterness etched about her mouth, her remoteness. To-night it would be different. She'd be so conscious of Marais's love that the barrier would melt, they would talk unconstrainedly of the things nearest their hearts—their mothers, the child, the future, Sydney's and Marais's.

The girl hurrying home was the only living creature in sight. The street stretched hot and empty under the red, slanting eye of the hazy sun. The shutters of the houses on either side were closed tight to keep out the steaming heat. Only one sign of life besides herself was in sight—a gray car which slid oilily around the Wentworth corner. Marais looked after it speculatively a moment. The set of the driver's head, the turn of his shoulders beneath his gray dust coat seemed vaguely familiar. She dismissed the fleeting impression with a shrug in her search for her doorkey among the contents of her school bag. By the time she had found it, let herself into the house, bathed and put on a fresh, white voile, it was six o'clock. She could set the table for Young John and prepare his supper. He'd be in any time now, hungry as a bear.

The telephone cut whangingly across her busy

thoughts. Her heart vibrated to its ring which was like an alarm bell through the still room. Sydney's voice in her ear—a little hurried: "I'm not feeling up to company to-night, dear. The heat has laid me out. I know you'll understand. You're such a darling. To-morrow we'll have our visit. No, I don't need anything. If I keep quiet I'll be all right."

Marais hung up the receiver with a mingled feeling of disappointment, frustration, and foreboding. Of course, the heat prostrated Sydney. Now more than ever. And she had always taken the liberty of breaking an engagement on the shortest notice in the world. Why should one be disturbed about a thing Sydney did every day?

But ten o'clock found her pacing the garden, watching the dark pile of John Wentworth's house beyond the oak. Not a sign of light in Sydney's window. The whole place lay wrapped in profoundest repose. She was probably asleep—would laugh to-morrow when Marais told her how she'd marched back and forth like a guard in the heavy darkness. All the same she'd feel better to walk over and see if there was a light in the parlors. It was possible Sydney had decided to stay up. If so Marais would brave the irritated flash of her eye and run in just to assure herself that she was all right. She was so alone with only deaf old Wong in the basement.

Was ever a night so dark and breathless? Even the stars seemed to throb faintly through a blanket of heat which descended upon the trees, the grounds, the great house itself, smothering from remembrance that moon-witched evening of the Hawaiian fête when every corner of the Lost Garden had shone

clear as day and the radiance sifted like gold dust beneath the laurestinus bush.

Marias turned the corner around which the gray car had slid that afternoon. Yes, lights picked out the windows of the double parlors. Sydney was up. Restless and couldn't sleep. She'd be glad enough to have Marais run in for a moment. Wouldn't it surprise her, though? The girl quickened her pace along the driveway.

On the third step from the top of the stone flight she paused and lifted her head. That sound. From somewhere near at hand it come, low, dying away in the blackness. A moan, distinct, long drawn out. A chill of terror crinkled over Marais as she heard it. She ran up the remaining steps and into the lighted hall.

The house was filled with a profound quiet. She stepped to the door of the front parlor. Two chairs were drawn cozily out from the circle of stiff walnut and rosewood furniture. The light from the tall white candles which Sydney always substituted for the hard brilliance of the cut-glass chandeliers fell on the sweeping lace curtains at the long windows, the brass bowl of red roses on the Chickering square piano near which gleamed Sydney's golden harp, on the gilt-framed portrait of John Wentworth's wife Sydney in a blue satin gown with enormous sleeves, tightly pinched waist, and golden hair elaborately dressed in braids and drooping curls. The heavy velvet portières cast the back parlor into vague gloom. Both rooms were untenanted. Sydney must have gone upstairs. Marais decided to follow.

She set one foot on the first step; then her fingers closed convulsively over the shining rail. A long,

low moan broke the stillness. If her life had depended upon the act, she couldn't have turned her eyes toward the flower-scented parlor from whence came that sound. But how she listened, every drop of blood in her body praying, "Oh, God, don't let me hear it again!"

But it came, longer and more desolate than before. And slowly, pushed by a power stronger than the fear which rooted her to the stair, she walked into the big room and toward the shadow cast by the curtains.

God, was it Sydney who lay there on the Turkish prayer rug in her black sleeveless dinner gown! Her eyes staring, staring darkly up, froth gathering at the corners of her mouth?

At the repetition of that long, low groan Marais fell on her knees, whispering, "Sydney, Sydney, what is it?" But even in the crazy turmoil of her thoughts she saw that Sydney's expression was one of dazed horror rather than pain, that the moan she uttered from time to time was mechanical. She saw something else, too, which caused her to bend forward with a smothered sob. A dark, sticky fluid forming a blotch on Sydney's bare throat and dripping over her white arm grew momentarily on the pale mosaics of the rug.

"Sydney, darling, what has happened?" Marais's voice gathered the sharpness of despair with each succeeding word.

The dark, glassily filmed eyes turned slowly toward her. For some moments they looked dimly at the girl's blanched face over which the tears streamed. Then the lips, ashen even through their

carmine, moved ever so slightly. Marais bent her head to catch the words:

“Water—thirsty—shot in the side.”

Marais leaped upright, her mind tearing frantically through the miasma of this nightmare. Should she go to the basement and try to rouse old Wong? No, time would be saved—God, God, time needed to be saved!—if she ran upstairs. She could find things in Sydney’s room. And there she could telephone to Dr. Simmons without being heard.

Her feet winged with terror, her heart bursting at her ignorance in such an emergency, her mind a ringing chasm of why—why—why, she sped to the upper floor. How the details of Sydney’s room stamped themselves on her tortured thoughts: the gleaming disarray of brushes and overturned jars and perfume bottles on the dressing table where Sydney had so carelessly combed her hair; the orchid negligee thrown carelessly on the couch; the closet door left open just as though Sydney herself might step from it, a radiant, moving presence—And then across her ears again that long, dreadful moan.

Her harried eyes swept the space. Hurry, hurry! No time to lose—with Sydney’s lifeblood ebbing away. The telephone—there on the table. One motion and she flung aside with such force the dainty, French lady concealing it that the china head splintered against the table’s glass top. Dr. Simmons—oh, if he was only in. But she didn’t remember his number. An anguished, fumbling search in the phone book—and she had it at last, had gotten his house, given the message to his wife. He was out on a call, but his assistant would come immedi-

ately. And she'd have him follow as soon as he returned. With a sob of relief Marais hung the receiver on the hook.

She was in the bathroom gathering towels, filling a pitcher with water, finding a glass, searching for a pair of scissors. First she'd staunch that flow of sticky, awful fluid— Who, who had done it? "Oh, God, you mustn't let Sydney die! We've got to save her. Give me wisdom. I haven't asked you for much. Give it to me, I tell you."

Once more she knelt beside Sydney. Was wiping the poor mouth; moistening the lips; letting some water slip down the parched throat. With something definite to do she had quit her trembling. Cut with steady fingers the chiffon and satin from Sydney's left side below that stain on her neck—that stain which in her absence had spread horribly on the rug. Washed the blood away from the jagged wound just beneath the left breast. Tried to staunch the flow that darkened the cloths she had brought. But how it came, slowly but inevitably, wetting her hands, her dress, dyeing the towels, spreading to the polished floor. And all the time that moan, mechanical but appalling. "It isn't Sydney lying there; it isn't. I'm not kneeling here sopping up her blood. This is a dream. We'll wake up and find ourselves in the Lost Garden. Oh, Sydney!"

Finally the blood stopped oozing from the hole in the torn side. Marais packed towels about it. She needed more—must get some. With the tensing of her body as she prepared to rise Sydney's eyes opened. The hand at her side lifted, a faint sugges-

tion of the old, imperious Sydney. The girl clasped the cold fingers, choking back her grief.

"Don't leave me," whispered Sydney. "I'm afraid. . . . Promise you'll stay." The pupils of the brown eyes dilated darkly.

Marais nodded. She couldn't deny the appeal of those eyes. Didn't try to. Was torturedly glad in her wretchedness that the barrier was gone. Sydney sighed as she sank down once more beside her. Then Marais knew she had something she wanted to say.

"Grandfather did it. He came sooner than I expected—and found Preston here. . . . He shot him too." The whisper was strangled in a cough, a strange, loose cough which brought up clots of blood. Marais, shuddering, wiped them away. The hold of Sydney's hand on hers never loosened.

So the driver of the gray car had been Preston Marbury. The old man had found him there. His rage had spurted out murderously. As she had always known some day it would. The poor, bad old man. Where were he and Preston now?

Sydney began whispering again: "Shot him down like a dog. . . . Before he shot me. . . . But Preston got away. . . . Crawled out into the gar-garden." Once more the rattling cough, the bright blood.

"Don't talk, darling." Marais was shaking so that she could scarcely wipe the clotted mouth.

"I must talk—I must tell you. You're all I've got left." The cold clasp on Marais stiffened into steel. "He drove up this afternoon. I didn't want him to come. . . . We talked. . . . He had his arm about me. . . . Grandfather found us. . . . He still

thinks Quent and I are married. . . . You know him." Was there a gleam of elfishness in Sydney's eye?

Marais looked about the shadowy brightness of the room. "Where did your grandfather go, dearest?" The question came involuntarily.

Sydney shook her head feebly. "I don't know. . . . He rushed out. . . . He must have been crazy, he looked so strange. . . . Oh, Marais, I'm so afraid to die."

Marais bent closer to her in sudden fierceness, to protect her from the wings of death if they were hovering near. "Sydney, darling, you're not going to die. When Dr. Simmons comes, he'll know exactly what to do."

But Sydney's features had sharpened. Her eyes seemed fixed in an agonized effort to be understood. She spoke with greater difficulty, each word a rattling sob.

"Marais, there's something—I broke my mother's heart. . . . Her face shrank away until there was nothing to it. . . . I see it every night. . . . She tried to keep me good. . . . I killed her. If I had it to do over——"

"Sydney, Sydney, don't!" Would the doctor never come?

"Marais—my little boy—" A tear rolled from the heavy eye and lost itself among the bright, tangled locks above her ear.

Silence except for the sputter of a candle flame burning up the wax. A long silence this time. No moaning. Marais peered into the still face. She drew back. The eyes half open shone dead. Across the blood-flecked mouth fluttered no breath. The

nose seemed suddenly pinched. It was no longer Sydney; it was a shell.

At that moment the sound of the doctor's steps on the stairs struck Marais's ears. She unclasped the icy hold. Rose and went to the door. Faced him, returned his startled look. "She's dead," she said slowly. "Mother and child. Her grandfather killed them both."

"That accounts for it," she heard him mutter.

"For what?" she asked sharply.

"Mr. Wentworth's done for too. I stumbled over him on the steps. It looks like a stroke of apoplexy."

She must have passed him lying dead on his own threshold. Dead of a burst of rage. The poor, bad old man. Sydney, Sydney! Surely the fabric of the Wentworth family had fallen to the ground.

CHAPTER X

THE STREAM OF LIFE

SYDNEY was dead. Every morning of her life Marais must wake on that thought. That something beautiful, something which sprang up and grew strong and radiant like flowers, was gone forever. Something that laughed at life and set the blood tingling in one's veins like watching the curvet of a beautiful horse or the plunge over rocks of a torrent of spray. All that was vanished from the earth, leaving her heart a dull weight in her breast.

All she had now of Sydney were memories and her story which she kept in her sore heart. For the most part she had answered promptly enough the questions put to her at the coroner's inquest. "But if they thought I was going to tell any of the things I knew, Sydney, darling——"

"Had you ever met the husband of the deceased?"

"No."

"Do you know how long they have been married?"

"No."

"Have you any reason to believe there was trouble between them?"

Her hand had rested on the Bible when she had taken her oath.

"I decline to answer that question."

"Have you known the deceased for a long time?"

"Since we were children."

"Did you see the grandfather of the deceased im-

mediately before the stroke which caused his death?"

"No, he must have fallen on the steps before I went over to see Mrs. Waynor."

"Were you on terms of friendship with him?"

"He was a friend of my grandparents and my parents."

"And not of yours?"

"No."

"Did you ever know of any difficulty between him and his granddaughter?"

"No—yes."

"Anything that might have led to his killing her?"

"I can't answer that."

"Do you know the young man Preston Marbury?"

"Yes." Thank God, she would never have to know him again. He lived, but his face was terribly scarred by John Wentworth's pistol shot, and he had disappeared from the sanatorium where he had been cared for—no one knew whither.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"No."

"Has he been an intimate friend of the Wentworth and Dalrymple families for a long time?"

"Not an intimate friend."

"Just on terms of ordinary friendship?"

"I don't know."

"Miss Plover, are you an only daughter?"

"Yes."

"Your mother is not living?"

No, her mother was not living. They were all—
all gone; except herself and Young John. Even Dan
stood a great way off from her in a cloud which ir-

recoverable distance casts about those who are lost to one forever. All through the year following Sydney's death, through her teaching, her wrestling with Young John's first year in high school, Dan was close to her in her dreams. Yet she knew he would never come back.

He did, though. Not as Marais had dreamed he might, through the spring nights when she heard his footsteps down the long labyrinths of her sleeping thought, or saw their shadows close together pacing the forest aisles of green and silver, above them the inverted bowl of a blue, sunlit sky.

He came on Saturday, the hottest day in August—more than a year since she had sent Gil away with that whimsical renunciation in his eyes. Just a touch of north wind lifted in little, scorching gusts, the air smoky from fires in the stubble fields. Its breath whirled the dust into spirals up and down College street, shriveled the Maréchal Niel rosebush by Mrs. Plover's front gate, making even the sturdy, gray-green leaves of the elderberry tree beneath which Dan had told Marais good-by so long ago droop limply.

She stood in its shadow shaking the dining-room rug when the chug-chug of a Ford stopping at the gate and the chopped, protesting ring of the doorbell burst with their warning of company on her reluctant ears. Eleven o'clock in the morning. And the house torn up from end to end because the warehouse had burned down and Theodore had a day off before going to work at the California Packing Sheds.

"Who can be coming at this hour, Theodore?"

The blue and white fringe of her rug trailed disastrously in the dirt.

Theodore emerged from the cloud of dust he had beaten from the carpet on the clothesline. "Some Dolly Varden or other," he muttered. Then a gleam of anxiety crinkled his eyes. "Better let me go, Marais. Your face is dirty."

Marais opened her mouth to retort, "Well, yours is none too clean."

But the words were never uttered, for steps sounded on the bricks—on the board walk. Around the corner of the house strode a tall man, a cravenette dust coat swinging from his broad shoulders, his eyes brimming with misty light which seemed to spill all over his bronzed face.

Marais did not speak a word. She just looked and looked, and her heart set up a great hammering. Dan stood there—so close to her that she could touch him. When she had thought she would never see him again. She had tried over and over to imagine what their meeting might be, but she never dreamed it would be so simple. That he would be the old Dan, and yet changed, deepened and made generous, as though the earth had given him her warmth. That he would just say, "Marais" in his husky voice, mellower than it used to be, and hold out his hands.

Still she couldn't speak. "Dan, Dan, is it really you?" But, oh, the wash of memories that swept her up and carried her on its tide back to the day he had stood there before her, mutely begging her to understand why he was going to Idaho. His eyes were different now. Pleading as they had been then, but unclouded. She had never seen them thus—

clear, black waters beneath which lay lovely, star secrets. They drew his name from her lips before she knew she had uttered it.

"Dan—where did you come from?" Clumsy, inept words, but her heart was singing a song of joy.

"I came from Russia."

Marais's feet touched earth. "In the Ford?" Goodness, why did Theodore beat that carpet as though they were going to say something they didn't want him to hear?

"No, from Berkeley in that. I didn't know till I got there that you were here. Harnett told me."

Marais did not reply. Now that her heart had lessened its thick pounding she could regard him more reflectively. So all this time he had thought she was with Gil. Her eyes traced the little, criss-cross furrows on his uncovered forehead, the lines graven on either side of his big mouth. They hadn't been there when he went away.

The way he threw back the blob of hair thrilled her almost insupportably. "Get your hat and let's go to Fowler's."

Marais caught her breath. "Fowler's. Why, nobody's there. Old Mrs. Fowler's dead, and the pirate's gone to Montana."

Still he persisted, coming closer to her. "Let's go anyhow."

She raised her hands to her rumpled hair, more to delay each moment of bliss than to oppose Dan. After all, it might be only a dream which would fade the next instant.

"Please, Marais."

No one could resist that voice. Besides, it was

better to obey than to stand there quivering for fear he would hear the thudding of her heart. Just a moment to slip off her apron and smooth her hair. Wasn't it like Dan to think she could go anywhere, even to Fowler's, just as she was? "One who was as dead has returned," her heart sang all the way upstairs. "Returned—returned—returned."

Down College Street, out Cemetery Avenue, across the flat, sunny country she drove beside him, feeling his arm when he turned the wheel, thrilling, saying over and over to herself: "Oh, God, this can't be true. Oh, God, you can't have been this good to me. I don't deserve it from you. I don't deserve it from him."

Dan swung her on the old, gnarled limb of the cottonwood tree, the very one on which they had dangled their legs the day she had plumped into the irrigating ditch. Only that had been a day in April with the fruit trees frothing over, tender white and pink. This was August, the sun brazen at high noon, the only cool spot just where they sat beneath the full-leaved cottonwoods. For a time they stayed silent like people waiting and preparing themselves for some great event. Then they talked a little—of Mrs. Plover, of Marais's work in Oakleyville, of Dan's year in Russia. But finally they lapsed into stillness again as though words broke the pattern being woven by the flowing water, the fadeless sky, and the strong rhythm of their hearts. Marais watched dreamily the figures of men in a distant field clearing the hard soil of its beard of stubble. From each end of the pasture long billows of gray smoke pierced by red tongued flame rolled along the ground. Midway they met, sending a column of

smoke and fire heavenward. Her own life had been like that with its spirit of youth's rebellious energy halted and shaped anew by life's larger law.

Dan's voice broke the bright, shaded quiet. "Marais, dearest, you know why I'm here." His arm was about her. She felt his strength. "Because I love you," the deep, eager voice went on, "more than life itself. I want you to marry me."

She saw the old dogged look dawn in his eyes, the square set of his jaw. But she saw something else too; that quietude, that gentleness, that willingness to relinquish his dear desire, mingled with the persistence which never admitted failure—the look his face had borne that evening on the Berkeley hillside. He had suffered. He had arranged for her to be happy in her work on the *Mirror*, had seen that that meant nothing to her. Then he had gone to Russia, thinking she was going away with Gil—a step against all his training and standards. Yet he loved her. He had refused to know anything except her essential self. Even in the finality of failure he had clung to something which whispered that it could not die, that all things good and true and beautiful come to pass. He loved her.

Suddenly she stooped and laid her lips upon his brown, muscular hand clasping the cottonwood branch.

"Don't!" He drew it away sharply and frowned at the crystal drop gleaming on its surface. Then he saw that she was crying helplessly and drew her more closely into his arms.

"But, Dan, I'm not worth it," she whispered.

He made a little, inarticulate sound and pressed his lips to her bright, straying hair.

"You don't know. . . . I made my mother unhappy. . . . Something—God—Sydney—I don't know what—saved me from killing her. I've been pig-headed, opinionated, selfish—I still am——"

He closed her mouth with his lips. Beneath his her lips parted. All the world of noon stood still, all the hot radiance of the day focused in their oneness as her spirit streamed up to cleave to his. She leaned against him, content in surrender. It was their moment beneath the laurestinus bush over again, but now there was no breathlessness, of uncertainty. They had belonged to one another from the beginning. Fear and doubt and stubbornness had stood between them. But all antagonism had melted in their suffering, and the warm life which pulsed through them.

Then she felt his hands upon her shoulders. "You adorable goose." His voice was husky and in his eyes humor struggled with rapture. "Do you suppose I don't know you're opinionated and narrow and cocksure, that you've ridden roughshod over things other people hold dear—all in the name of finding yourself? Do you think that's why I love you? I love you because you are you. Because without you life isn't. Oh, I've gone on and done things, believing I'd lost you. In fact, this is the best year I've had yet in my work. And there are big things ahead. But now—oh, Marais." He stooped and kissed her forehead, and she saw there were tears in his eyes stormy now with feeling.

She was filled with wonder. So—Dan didn't think she was perfect. Had a full conception of her shortcomings. A strange, sweet, resentful happiness stirred in her veins. A sheet to windward. A rock

in the storm. Dan a part of her life, just like the rugged Sierras, only blessedly close.

"Well, I see I don't have to tell you the story of my life," she observed dryly, a smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"No, but I've something to tell you." He kissed her again. "A secret. I'm going to buy Fowler's."

"Fowler's." Marais looked at the alfalfa, the leafy orchard, the spot where the little, brown house must be nestled among its locusts. Home. It would be—it was home. Here they would live—here their children would play hide and seek in the orchard, hunt eggs in the tall barn, fall from this gnarled limb as she had done so long ago. Oh, it was as natural as if she and Dan had planned it all out step by step. The children, too, were natural. She knew now that they had lived for ever so long in her mind and heart. "Fowler's!"

Dan nodded, his face shining. "Yes, sweetheart. Ten acres. We'll fix up the house—maybe build a new one. Oh, we'll have a great time planning. It'll be a place where you can finish the novel. Where I can do a little farming between whacks at bridge building. When we're tired of the city, a place to run away to. To renew life——"

Marais's eyes became thoughtful. What was it she had told Gil? "Oakleyville is the pool to which I shall return again and again to refresh myself." Yes, she and Dan would both come back here to renew life. Her gaze followed the water slipping away silver-green beneath the quiet trees. Each year it slipped away like that. Each year their lives would slip away, in one united stream, crossed by shadows, splashed with light—the stream of life.

Dan's eyes would never lose their stormy tenderness when they rested upon her. She would never cease to thrill at his enveloping gaze. But deeper than that bond would always dwell within her the conviction that not in the figures, bright and dark, making patterns on the stream of life lay her strength. Not even in Dan's love. She alone was the citadel of her power and her freedom.

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